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Prisoner of the Signifier, Returnee to the Real: Subjectivity in Orlando through Lacans' Three Orders

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Abstract

This paper systematically deconstructs the mechanism of gendered subject formation in Virginia Woolf's Orlando, through Jacques Lacan's three orders—the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real. The first part takes up the Symbolic, showing clothing as a quilting point that anchors Orlando into shifting gendered positions. The cross-dressing plot exposes gender as a floating signifier, and more pointedly, satirizes the alienating force of the Symbolic order. The second part turns to the Imaginary, analyzing the mirror projection in Orlando's two erotic experiences with Sasha and Shelmerdine. Heterosexual desire emerges as structurally determined, produced by the combined effect of symbolic castration's asymmetry and imaginary méconnaissance. The third part unfolds from the dimension of the Real, setting the jouissance of Orlando's erotic life against that encountered in his relation to nature. The paper argues that emancipation cannot be reduced to the acquisition of new signifying positions within the Symbolic. It requires, rather, holding open a space that resists symbolic confirmation, in which the subject can bear its constitutive lack and remain exposed to the jouissance of the Real.

Keywords

Orlando, Jacques Lacan, the Symbolic, the Imaginary, the Real

1. Introduction

Virginia Woolf stands as one of the most pivotal modernist writers in twentieth-century English literature. Since the second-wave feminist movement of the 1970s, critics such as Susan Gubar have been instrumental in positioning her as a forerunner of feminist thought. Furthermore, the distinctive narrative of sex change in her novel *Orlando* has, since its publication, established it as a seminal text for probing the question of gender construction. The novel recounts the legendary life of the young

aristocrat Orlando across nearly four centuries. At first he was just a courtly youth in the Elizabethan age. Then, he transformed into a woman upon awakening from a deep sleep after an ambassadorial mission to Turkey in the eighteenth century. He, afterwards, traversed the Victorian era, ultimately emerging as an award-winning poet in 1928.

However, much existing feminist criticism remains confined to the register of gender politics, revealing the novel's subversion of the patriarchal order and celebrating androgyny as an emancipatory ideal. Yet, it pays comparatively less attention to the questions about how the gendered subject is produced and how desire is shaped and circumscribed amid this very process. Lacanian theory offers a particularly apt framework for analyzing this mechanism. Significantly, a profound connection already exists between Woolf and psychoanalytic thought. To be specific, she was, alongside Freud, an author for the Hogarth Press, whose diaries and letters repeatedly record her reading of as well as reflections on Freudian theory and who, in her later years, even paid a personal visit to Freud. Lacan's theory, what's more, was constructed precisely through a return to and reconfiguration of Freud's work. In light of this, the present article draws upon Lacan's theory of the three orders to systematically examine the mechanism of gendered subject construction in *Orlando*, and to explore the possibility of a subjective position that can coexist harmoniously with constitutive lack.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Lacan's Theory of the Three Orders

Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) stands as one of the most influential psychoanalysts and structuralist thinkers of the twentieth century. His major works, The Seminar (Séminaire, 1953-1980) (Lacan, 1988-2020) and Écrits (1966) (Lacan, 1977), reconfigured Freud's theory of the unconscious through a linguistic lens, profoundly reshaping subsequent paradigms across the humanities and social sciences.

Within his theoretical system, the theory of the three orders constitutes the core framework for analyzing the structure of the subject. It delineates the subject's existential structure into three registers: the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real.

The Symbolic is the order of the signifier. Drawing on the linguistic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure, Lacan distinguishes the linguistic sign into two dimensions: the signifier, which is the acoustic or written form of the sign, and the signified, which is the concept or meaning it conveys. The signifier takes primacy over the signified. Lacan once said: "The signified is not something given in advance, but rather an effect produced by the play of signifiers". Signifiers refer to one another, forming the signifying chain, along which meaning incessantly slides without ever reaching a final destination. As the core structure of the symbolic order, the Other (Autre) refers to the external symbolic order constituted by language, law, and cultural norms. It is the fundamental alterity that the subject encounters upon entering the linguistic world. Preceding the subject, it defines the subject's position and identity from the outside (Lacan, 1988). Through the Other, the Symbolic order imposes castration

upon the subject, compelling the subject to relinquish the primordial fantasy of wholeness, to accept its own structural lack, and thereby to be anchored to a determinate symbolic position (Lacan, 2017). The quilting point (point de capiton), in turn, is the crucial nodal point that temporarily halts the endless sliding of signifiers. It rigidly fastens a particular signifier to a particular meaning, provisionally stabilizing the floating chain of signification and thereby integrating the subject into a given symbolic network (Lacan, 1993).

The Imaginary is the order of the mirror image, grounded in Lacan's early theory of the mirror stage (Lacan, 1977). Lacan observes that the infant identifies with its own complete image in the mirror, thereby forming a fictive and unified ego. The other (l'autre) is the other within this Imaginary order: a semblable, a specular double, the object onto which the subject projects its own mirror image. The subject depends upon the other's recognition to sustain its sense of a unified self (Lacan, 1978). The objet petit is the fascinating leftover that the subject perceives in the other and the cause of desire that drives the subject to ceaselessly pursue the ideal specular image (image spéculaire).

The Real is the residual zone that language and meaning can never fully colonize and the traumatic leftover left behind after symbolization fails. The objet petit a in the Real is what remains after the subject enters the Symbolic and undergoes castration. It constitutes the fundamental motor of desire's perpetual motion. When the objet petit a is activated, the subject approaches jouissance, which is an excessive enjoyment that transcends the symbolic order, mingling pleasure and pain (Lacan, 1992).

The sex change, the genesis of erotic desire, and the ineffable experience of nature in *Orlando* correspond respectively to the Symbolic order's disciplining of the subject, the production of desire through misrecognition to the mirror image, and the manifestation of Real jouissance. Therefore, this article adopts the theory of the three orders as its point of entry.

2.2 Review of Studies on Orlando

Existing scholarship has largely focused on two areas. The first deconstructs the novel's gender politics and its androgynous ideal from a feminist perspective. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Butler, 1990) offers a crucial reference point for understanding Orlando's gender fluidity. The second analyzes its biographical parody and philosophy of time from a narratological perspective, with scholars such as Sue Roe and Michael McKeon focusing on Woolf's narrative form and her treatment of reality. In recent years, some scholars have begun to apply Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to readings of *Orlando*. However, these studies have largely confined themselves to the single dimension of the mirror stage and gender identification or to Lacan's theory of sexuation to explicate Orlando's sex change. The three orders were not employed as an integrated framework to examine Orlando's subjective construction. Accordingly, this article interprets *Orlando* through the integrated framework of the three orders, reframing the experience of nature as a persistence of Real jouissance, and thereby explores the possibility of a feminine subjective position that can coexist harmoniously with lack.

3. Anchoring and Drifting of the Signifier: Symbolic Gender Discipline and Orlando's Cross-Dressing Revolt

The skirts plot in *Orlando* exhaustively reveal the process by which the Symbolic order alienates the subject. It encompasses both the alienating function of the Other within the subject and the influence exerted upon the subject by the other. At the same time, Orlando's repeated acts of cross-dressing in the eighteenth century exhibit the drifting nature of the signifier, thereby not only deconstructing gender essentialism but also laying bare the absurdity of the subject's alienation by the Symbolic order.

The clothes changing plot in the novel disclose the mechanism by which the Symbolic order alienates Orlando, constituting the fundamental logic by which the Symbolic order alienates all subjects. According to Lacanian signifier theory, "the incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier constitutes the drifting of the signifier" (Lacan, 1977). A signifier is explicated by other signifiers, retroactively producing different signifieds. The sartorial signifier of the skirt in *Orlando* could signify the skirt worn by men in ancient Greece, or the long robe worn by men in China's Han dynasty, or equally the skirt worn by women. Within the novel, however, this sartorial signifier is quilted exclusively to the signifier "woman" via the quilting point. Lacan offers the following explication of the quilting point: "The quilting point is the point at which the signifier is anchored to meaning; that is, the point at which it comes to a halt, where it is fixed, stabilized, rendered readable". Thus, it is only upon donning the skirt that Orlando becomes conscious of her female identity; likewise, the other takes this same sartorial marker as the criterion by which to identify her as a woman. As the novel itself observes: "These compliments would certainly not have been paid her had her skirts, instead of flowing, been cut tight to her legs in the fashion of breeches" (142). Yet the thoughts of both the subject and the other are governed by the Other.

Accordingly, the Symbolic order takes the skirt as its criterion and defines Orlando under the signifier "woman". Subsequently, the Symbolic order correlates the signifier "woman" with an array of other signifiers, such as chastity, being courted, being looked at, objecthood, submissiveness and so forth, and forcibly imposes them upon Orlando, chiefly through the following two mechanisms.

First, once the subject has accepted the gender signifier assigned by the Symbolic order, the other signifiers corresponding to that gender signifier directly govern the subject's thoughts. Consequently, Orlando, who had been a man for over thirty years and even embraced aristocratic ladies and had once taken a wife, actually found herself thinking of chastity upon recognizing her female identity (117). Under the masculine gender signifier, Orlando had not only given no thought to preserving chastity but had led a life of amorous adventure. Yet, at the moment she becomes conscious of being a woman, she grows preoccupied with chastity in a manner diametrically opposed to her former self. This is because the Orlando of the masculine period was situated within a symbolic network corresponding to the signifier "man", which required him to occupy such symbolic positions as courage. For instance, in the Elizabethan age, Orlando practiced slashing at a pagan's skull with a sword in the attic, following the

example of his forebears (8). Signifiers such as chastity simply did not exist the masculine Orlando's symbolic network.

Second, the other signifiers corresponding to the subject's gender signifier are indirectly instilled into the subject's thoughts by the external little other. Instances of this include the captain erecting an awning for Orlando (117), the sailor who nearly plunges into the sea while gazing at Orlando's calves (118), the Archduke's remark that is "she was, after all, only a woman" when Orlando cheats at a game (139), and Alexander Pope's rebuke of Orlando through his "Characters of Women" (163). Through the Other's direct manipulation of the subject and its indirect influence by way of manipulating the object, the Symbolic order imperceptibly completes the subject's alienation. Gazing upon her homeland, "Do what she would to restrain them, the tears came to her eyes, until, remembering that it is becoming in a woman to weep, she let them flow" (125). Driving towards London, Orlando grows fearful on horseback. Simultaneously, "She was becoming a little more modest, as women are, of her brains, and a little more vain, as women are, of her person. Certain susceptibilities were asserting themselves, and others were diminishing" (142). The process of Orlando's alienation by the Symbolic order lays bare the fundamental logic by which all subjects, upon entering the Symbolic, are alienated.

The cross-dressing episodes in *Orlando* not only challenge gender essentialism but also further reveal the absurdity of the subject's alienation by the Symbolic order. Orlando finds in her wardrobe "many of the clothes she had worn as a young man of fashion, … dressed in it she looked the very figure of a noble Lord" (118). Then she goes out and encounters Nell, who takes her home. On the way, Nell "To feel her hanging lightly yet like a suppliant on her arm, roused in Orlando all the feelings which become a man" (164). From Orlando's interaction with Nell, we can deduce that once Orlando dons male attire, the other, governed by the Symbolic Other, recognizes Orlando as male. Afterwards, through various behaviors, the other instills in Orlando the signifiers corresponding to the signifier "man", Orlando thereby reacquiring a masculinity predicated on being depended upon. At its root, this occurs because "the signifier itself possesses the property of drifting" (Lacan, 1977). The same stable and unchanging subject, merely through a change of clothing, has entirely different gender attributes superimposed upon her. Gender attributes, therefore, do not originate from within the subject but derive from the temporary anchoring of the Symbolic order's signifying chain.

On the whole, the patriarchal Symbolic order subsumes differently gendered subjects into corresponding regulatory systems, compelling them to perform gendered identities according to prescribed symbolic positions. Orlando's cross-dressing, however, discloses the fluidity of gender attributes, and in doing so precisely satirizes the absurdity of the subject's alienation by the Symbolic order.

4. Complete Mirror Image and Erotic Misrecognition: Production Mechanism of Heterosexual Desire in the Imaginary Order

Within the Imaginary order, governed by the subject's gendered symbolic position are both the process by which the subject's erotic desire for the other is generated and the possibility of that desire can subsequently develop. In the Symbolic order, heterosexual subjects undergo asymmetrical castration, such that each subject tends to perceive in the opposite sex the object of its own lack, thereby giving rise to the objet petit a. Driven to pursue a complete self-image, the subject misrecognizes this mirror desire as desire for the other as such, and ultimately develops erotic longing for the other. Within the Symbolic order, culture and gender function analogously in the respect that subjects from different cultures may generate erotic desire whereas whether the desire can be sustained depends upon the position of the subject's gender signifier.

Once the subject has been alienated by the Symbolic order's gender regulations, it comes to lack the traits of the other sex that are incompatible with its own assigned gender. Unlike the eighteenth century depicted in Part One, by the Victorian era, Orlando "was insensibly afflicted with the damp already" (176). When she ventures out in black trousers, she no longer does so with her former ease; on the contrary, she now feels deeply ashamed. Within the Symbolic order, subjects of different genders serve for each other as the masked bearers of what they themselves has been deprived of through castration. In other words, men perceive in women the emotional freedom forbidden to themselves, while women perceive in men the agential subjectivity denied to them. When the Symbolic order's gender discipline intensifies to such a degree, the lack within the subject can no longer be supplemented through acts of cross-dressing that once transformed gendered attributes. Woolf writes: "Such is the indomitable nature of the spirit of the age, however, that it batters down anyone who tries to make stand against it far more effectually than those who bend its own way. Orlando had inclined herself naturally to the Elizabethan spirit, to the Restoration spirit, to the spirit of the eighteenth century, and had in consequence scarcely been aware of the change from one age to the other" (186). By the nineteenth century, Orlando has yielded to the will of the age, and the Symbolic order remolds her into an ever more womanly figure that she grows ashamed of going out in trousers; she begins, like a "the very image of appealing womanhood" (187), to ask herself upon whom she might depend, and when strolling in the garden, "she strayed out into the park alone, faltering at first and apprehensive lest there might be poachers or gamekeepers or even errand-boys to marvel that a great lady should walk alone" (188). Moreover, with every step she takes, Orlando nervously anticipates some impending crisis. Thus, in the nineteenth century the Symbolic order's gender discipline is intensified to an unprecedented degree. What's more, the Symbolic order's disciplining of the two sexes typically operates in opposite directions: the docility prescribed for women stands in stark contrast to the valor prescribed for men. Consequently, under this mode of gender discipline, the female subject gradually loses the traits of the other sex, thereby producing within the subject a lack of precisely those traits. As noted earlier, Orlando can no longer, as

she did in the eighteenth century, remedy the lack produced by the Symbolic order through cross-dressing.

Lacan contends that "love is giving something you don't have" (Lacan, 2015). It is thus only on the basis of the subject's own lack that erotic desire can arise. Orlando encounters Shelmerdine, a man "tall and broad-shouldered", possessed of "something romantic and chivalrous, passionate, melancholy" (191), and who furthermore conjures in her mind the image of him "roared brief orders to cut this adrift, to heave that overboard" (192). The traits Shel displays before Orlando are precisely those "masculine" qualities of which Orlando, as a nineteenth-century woman, is most radically bereft. Consequently, it "brought the tears to her eyes, tears, she noted, of a finer flavour than any she had cried before" (192). She experiences a sudden and inestimably precious joy. At this moment, Orlando falls in love with Shel.

"The objet petit a is that which the subject, in order to constitute itself, separates from itself as organ/object" (Lacan, 2014). It is the residue left behind after the intervention of the Symbolic order into the Real. It is the object and the cause of desire which keeps desire perpetually directed toward the other and perpetually unsatisfied. What Orlando senses in Shel is the objet petit a, which is a jouissance derived from the fantasy projected onto the other Shel and a fantasy calibrated precisely to the site of Orlando's lack. It is the ineffable delight that she feels after envisioning Shel ordering the mast to be cut down. During this period, Orlando lacks a multitude of traits belonging to the other gender, and is thus captivated by the fantasy of valor and decisiveness embodied by Shel. The objet petit a is thereby activated. "The objet petit a can also be understood as the cause of desire that is not the target object toward which desire is directed, but is which sets desire itself in motion". Hence, in order to sustain the activation of the objet petit a, Orlando desires to pursue a complete self-image. She perceives this mirror image in Shel, and through it as an erotic attachment to him. This, however, is in essence a misrecognition. Orlando mistakes the desire for her ideal specular image for desire for the little other as such. Thus, Orlando's erotic desire for Shel is the product of a joint operation in which function together the lack caused by the subject's alienation in the Symbolic order, and the subject's Imaginary longing for a complete self.

Beyond gender, cultural difference likewise engenders asymmetrical objects of lack within the subject. A subject belonging to one culture may project its own lack onto the other belonging to another, thereby activating the objet petit a within the subject and subsequently generating erotic desire. More crucially, however, in most cultures within the Symbolic order, same-sex erotic desire is proscribed and subject to symbolic annihilation, whereas heterosexual desire is permitted to flourish. The genesis of Orlando's desire for Sasha powerfully corroborates this argument. In the sixteenth century, the male Orlando spends most of his time within the highly civilized milieu of the English aristocratic household and court. What he consequently lacks within himself is unadorned wildness. Thus, upon first encountering Sasha, Orlando falls in love at first sight. Captivated by her singular allure, he calls Sasha

"a melon, an emerald, a fox in the snow" (25). These images are all uncivilized products of nature and exotic objects possessed of an untamed wildness. These distinctive fantasies correspond precisely to Orlando's internal lack, and from them the objet petit a emerges: "all his images at this time were simple in the extreme to match his senses and were mostly taken from things he had liked the taste of as a boy. But if his senses were simple they were at the same time extremely strong. To pause therefore and seek the reason of things is out of the question" (25). Driven to seek a complete self-image, Orlando perceives this mirror image in Sasha, and thus begins to develop an erotic desire for her. In essence, however, the object of this erotic desire is likewise a misrecognition.

What is deeply revealing is that, once this erotic desire has emerged, Orlando undergoes two diametrically opposed psychological processes. When he suspects Sasha of being male, "Orlando was ready to tear his hair with vexation that the person was of his own sex, and thus all embraces were out of the question" (25). The Symbolic order's gender discipline forbids Orlando from developing same-sex desire, retroactively rewriting his desire for Sasha, which is in essence his desire for his own ideal specular image, transforming it into sheer nonsense. Yet the moment Orlando recognizes Sasha as female, "Orlando stared; trembled; turned hot; turned cold; longed to hurl himself through the summer air; to crush acorns beneath his feet; to toss his arms with the beech trees and the oaks" (26). Only after receiving the Symbolic order's permission does Orlando permit this desire to develop in his thoughts, and subsequently pursue Sasha in action. Thus, Orlando's desire for Sasha is the product of pursuit of an ideal mirror image in the Imaginary order, combined with the Symbolic order's gender discipline. The Imaginary order, therefore, is subject to the regulatory force of the Symbolic. Within the Imaginary, same-sex desire is strangled at birth, while heterosexual desire is permitted to flourish.

5. From Confrontation to Coexistence: Call of the Real and an Alternative Possibility for Subjective Peace

Within the register of the Real, the subject's relationship with nature offers a mode of being distinct from that of erotic desire. In the erotic relation, the activation of the objet petit a depends upon the recognition of the other. Yet the uncontrollability of the other means that this activation can only occur intermittently. With a stable object such as nature, by contrast, the subject need not solicit recognition, nor need it fantasize that its lack will be filled. Mere proximity and mere coexistence suffice for the objet petit a to be activated. Orlando's experience beneath the great oak is precisely such a persistence of jouissance, one that requires neither recognition nor repletion to be evoked.

The subject's erotic desire for the other is founded upon its own lack. Driven by the objet petit a, the subject ceaselessly pursues a complete self. When subject perceives a complete ideal mirror image in the other, it misrecognizes the other as that image itself, and mistakes the pursuit of the image for the pursuit of the other. The mechanism by which Orlando's erotic desire for Sasha and Shel is generated illustrates this structure with striking precision. This mechanism, however, entails a decisive

consequence that whether with Sasha or with Shel, the activation of Orlando's objet petit a depends entirely on whether the other confirms that the subject's complete mirror image is projected onto him or her. If the other confirms it, the objet petit a is triggered; if not, it remains dormant. The root of this divergence lies in the differing nature of the objects. The object of erotic desire is the other, a person misrecognized as possessing that which the subject lacks. The defining feature of the other, however, is that it has its own desire and its own trajectory, who is therefore uncontrollable. In other words, the other can never consistently confirm the subject's wholeness. Nature, by contrast, is radically different. The great oak has neither desire of its own nor trajectory of its own, which is stable and does not depart with its own initiative. The triggering of the subject's surplus jouissance requires no mediation through "recognition". Hence, the very nature of these two modes of experience diverges fundamentally.

Take Orlando's feelings for Sasha as an illustration. When Sasha skates upon the ice (25-26), she is in essence confirming through her conduct, the projection of Orlando's complete mirror image onto her and only then is Orlando's objet petit a activated. By contrast, even when Orlando and Sasha walk together, if Sasha does not confirm Orlando's mirror projection through word or deed, the objet petit a remains dormant. When Sasha gnaws at a tallow candle, Orlando suspects that she may not be noble after all (36). At this moment, Sasha makes Orlando aware that the two are not the same. She unconsciously denies the projection of Orlando's complete mirror image, thereby threatening the very possibility of activating the objet petit a upon her. When Sasha sails away, leaving Orlando behind, Orlando abuses her with every means at his disposal (45). By this act, Sasha completely repudiates the projection of Orlando's ideal mirror image, and Orlando's objet petit a falls away from her. As for Shel, he is not always able to confirm Orlando's mirror projection (203). Thus, within the erotic relation, whether the subject's objet petit a can be activated depends upon whether the other confirms the subject's projection onto him or her. Given the subjective uncontrollability of the other, however, this mode of triggering the objet petit a is profoundly unstable.

Nature, by contrast, can trigger Orlando's objet petit a with steady constancy. His objet petit a is activated across more than three hundred years, regardless of Orlando's gender, whenever he keeps company with nature and whenever he is beneath the great oak. From the moment he throws himself down at the foot of the great oak at the age of sixteen (11) to his return to the same tree more than three centuries later (242)，whether he is a young aristocrat of the Elizabethan age, a woman poet of the Victorian era, or a modern woman of the twentieth century，the great oak is always there. It does not respond, does not confirm, does not refuse, whereas the other has its own desire and mutability, responding at one moment and withdrawing its response at the next. The great oak's silence thus means that it never enters the game of recognition, and consequently never poses the threat of withdrawing that recognition. Here, Orlando need not demand a response from it in order to prove her wholeness and thereby trigger the objet petit a. She need only coexist with it, and the surplus jouissance is activated.

In sum, Orlando's three-hundred-year life presents two distinct modes of being. In Imaginary erotic desire, Orlando pursues the repletion of a structural lack. In nature, by contrast, Orlando practices an alternative mode of existence: she does not pursue wholeness, but learns to live with lack, just as the great oak will never fill her lack. Yet it offers an experience more enduring than repletion. For example, each time Orlando draws near to it, she can activate the objet petit a within, without ever seeking its confirmation of a complete mirror image. If the subject stakes the entirety of its existential worth on the other's confirmation of its ideal mirror image, whether the objet petit a is triggered will forever be held hostage to the uncontrollability of the other. The betrayal or absence of the other will bring about the collapse of that fragile self. Orlando's relationship with nature, however, offers another possibility: beyond the sliding of signifiers in the Symbolic and the chase after mirror images in the Imaginary, the subject can establish a space of coexistence with a stable object, where the mere act of staying there is enough to trigger an experience of jouissance. Amid the never-ending sliding of the signifying chain and the cycle in which erotic fantasies are perpetually threatened with disintegration, nature allows Orlando to experience, in the midst of life, something approaching the Real.

6. Conclusion

This article has adopted Lacan's theory of the three orders as its framework to examine the process of subjective construction in Orlando. The Symbolic order anchors the subject's gender identity and manufactures lack; the Imaginary order generates erotic desire that is nonetheless destined for disintegration; and the Real opens up a space in which the subject can stably coexist with lack and thereby activate an experience of jouissance. This analysis also yields certain implications for feminism. The feminine subject can not only pursue alternative signifying positions within the Symbolic order, but can also transform her relationship to her own constitutive lack. She can accept the existence of structural lack, cease to stubbornly seek confirmation of her ideal mirror image from the other, and turn instead toward coexistence with a stable object, therein experiencing the surplus jouissance of the Real.

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