

# Naming Recoil

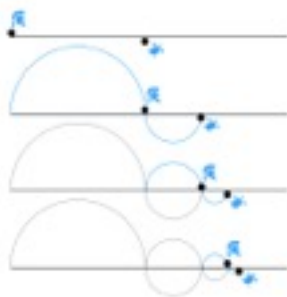
— Amazing How Hegel, Lacan, and Sorites All Got Together

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*Sorites is the wild card of Lacanian ideas. Its powers are Hegelian, because it is also the wild card of what Žižek has called “absolute recoil,” or “going to one’s ground,” although Žižek does not name sorites when he speaks about the logic of “one grain more” or “one hair less,” nor does he seem to be aware of the connection to Lewis Carroll’s symbolic logic. Carroll comes close to providing an early version of Lacan’s mathemes of sexuation, but it takes the non-Boolean calculus of George Spencer-Brown to reveal how sorites works “graphically,” and how, as a matheme in its own right, it works in literature and art, in the ethnographic logics of rites of passage, foundation magic, and in mythic conceptions of space and time.*



Pick four Lacanian ideas, any four. In this imaginary card trick situation, I will pick the ideas for you. There is of course the lead card, the death drive showing a gapped circle or possibly Magritte’s painting *Not to Be Reproduced* on the upper side (Image 1). Next up is Lacan’s most Hegelian card, the idea of the missed opportunity, probably showing Zeno’s favorite animal, a tortoise, with Achilles in hot pursuit (Image 2). My image favorite of this situation would be the Renaissance *Festina Lente* anchor and dolphin, a paradox about time where the past overshoots the present in the future anterior, the moment known by all dramaturges as *anagnorisis*, the time when the Awful Truth is recognized, retroactively, without anyone saying anything. The missed opportunity is balanced out by the Letter that Always Reaches Its Destination, so here we get two ideas for one.



The next card is a combination card: the mathemes of sexuation written simply as plusses and minuses in a quadrated field, a necessary reduction to see how men, women, exceptions and no exceptions, alls and not-alls relate to the similarly quadrated field of the discourses. There’s a space on this card for noting the loops Lacan uses to talk about binary relations converting pure contingencies to absolute necessities — another Hegelian card (Image 3).



The fourth card looks more like a card, since it has only to show the classic black or white dots pinned onto the backs of three prisoners who are told that, if they can guess which dot they have, black or white, they will be released (Image 4). The key to this game is that not only must the winning prisoner work out the math, but he must take into account the other prisoners’ subjectivity *as such*. In this, the game is close to that of Morra, the ancient European game of odds and evens using hand gestures. This nice clue swerves Lacan’s thinking close to that of Edgar Allan Poe, who was a genius with ciphers.<sup>1</sup> Poe made the same argument about subjectivity, and this argument, it

<sup>1</sup> W. H. Cudworth, “Cryptography — Mr. Poe as a cryptographer,” *Lowell Weekly Journal* (April 19, 1850): 2.

turns out, is key to his most “Lacanian” work, “The Purloined Letter.” As luck would have it — and luck is the flagship of any card trick — “The Purloined Letter” uses sorites in such a graphic way that it shows how it is the arts that provide Lacan his own personal master signifier, or at least provide *us* with the necessary critical super signifier to make sense of the unity behind Lacan’s psychoanalytical-philosophical views.

Can we count the cards in this deck and predict with any accuracy how the cards are going to be dealt in any game? I’m proposing that a method of card-counting already exists in various forms, in ethnography, art, and later in the philosophy of Hegel and psychoanalysis of Lacan. This is “sorites,” the weird logic defining how and at what point a bunch of sand grains becomes a pile, or how one more hair dropping makes for a bald head. Žižek introduces his readers to the sorites without naming it.<sup>2</sup> Sorites, always a back street of logic theory, doesn’t really make sense. When one grain of sand is added to another grain, then another is added, then another, etc., at some point the addition creates a “pile” of sand, but who can say at what point the additions have become a pile (Image 5)? Subtract a grain, it’s still a pile; subtract another, still a pile. The absurd condition is reached where, with only one grain left, you can’t say it’s not a pile. The pile is a “retroactive” designation of a universal condition, a predicate of a subject, that has arisen out of a completely contingent — literally *con-tingent* — process. The retroactive realization is always a case of the “missed opportunity,” a Zeno moment, a “too soon and too late.” To define this moment graphically, we have to see a past running across a present “now-point,” jumping the future by converting it into an “already-always” affair. Lacanians and Žižekians speak this language already, or rather already-always, so I don’t have to explain too much here. What I do have to argue is the heresy that Others have spoken this language — and been card-counting — before them.



Image 6. Lewis Carroll, Portrait of Alice Liddell (1859). Liddell was reputedly the source of the main idea and actual character of *Alice in Wonderland*.

Anyone Google-mining sorites is in for trouble unless she finds out about Lewis Carroll, the pen name of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (1832–1898), creator of fantastic poems and stories as well as pedophilic photographs curiously tolerated by upper-class Victorian society (Image 6). Carroll’s logic as well as his sexuality was non-Boolean, which is to say it supported the intrigues of the “fuzzy set,” the “both-and” rather than the either-or that Paul Verhaeghe has identified as Lacan’s preferred mode of reasoning.<sup>3</sup> This is the logical tonality of the not-all, the more than everything, and less than nothing.

I claim that the sorites is a kind of Wild Card for Lacan, but to see how this might be true, it’s necessary to employ a graphic transformation invented by the British mathematician, George Spencer-Brown.<sup>4</sup> Without

<sup>2</sup> In Slavoj Žižek, *The Most Sublime Hysteric: Hegel with Lacan* (Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity Press, [2014] ©2014), almost all chapter and section topics and key phrases could be taken, raw, as characterizations of the form or process of sorites. Some examples: “Logic of the Signifier” (Bk. 1, Chap. 3), “The Witz of Synthesis” (24–26), “Hegelian necessity” (32), “Retroactive Performative” (Chap. 2), “The Impossible Absolute” (Chap. 1), “radical scission” (45), “truth as the loss of the object” (18–20).

<sup>3</sup> Paul Verhaeghe, “From Impossibility to Inability: Lacan’s Theory on the Four Discourses,” in *The Letter, Lacanian Perspectives on Psychoanalysis*, 3 (Spring 1995): 91–108.

<sup>4</sup> George Spencer-Brown, *Laws of Form* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1969).

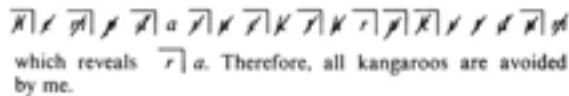
Spencer-Brown's non-numerical single-symbol calculus, Lewis Carroll's sorites logic looks like an impenetrable tangle of logical operations. With it, anyone with a pencil and two minutes can reduce the classic puzzles Carroll constructed to illustrate sorites logic (Image 7). What is more, translating sorites to the calculus shows visually how this logic underwrites most if not all of Lacan's major ideas, including the ones already cited. As an added bonus, sorites is the basis of important ethnographic conditions and stratagems used by writers, artists, and architects who, in effect, constitute a historical and universal dictionary of "Lacan before Lacan." With sorites, we can corroborate Lacan using ethnography and popular culture.

*The calculus*

We can demonstrate Spencer-Brown's calculus with a quick visual that shows how subject and predicate complement each other, by framing and then being framed. One way of describing Carroll's puzzles is to say that, in a hypothetical series of ten combinations of subject and predicate (twenty elements), eighteen terms will appear as both subject and predicate, while two will appear only once, and one will be the subject and the other the predicate of the answer to the puzzle (Image 8). These ten predications are a *delay*. They divert the puzzle into a seeming muddle of nonsense. This diversion involves such seemingly random statements such as "No cat fails to kill mice" and "The only animals in this house are cats." Note: in the twenty statements of the puzzle, nine will appear twice, once as a subject, once as a predicate. Two elements will appear only once (in this puzzle: "kangaroos" and "avoided by me").

- h* for *house, in this*
- c* for *cat*
- p* for *pet, suitable for*
- d* for *detested by me*
- a* for *avoided by me*
- m* for *moon, love to gaze at*
- v* for *carnivorous*
- n* for *night, prowls at*
- k* for *kill mice*
- t* for *take to me*
- r* for *kangaroo.*

We see from the principle of relevance that we do not need to adopt a variable for the set of animals. We now proceed to the transcription and cancellation



"answer" of the sorites is given by combining them:  
"All kangaroos are avoided by me."

Who cares? Of course, the contents of the statements are ridiculous — a diversion. The "pile" of statements could be considered as a series of frames that tighten their grip around a central statement or realization, so with the unity of the final terms, one as subject, the other as predicate. The experience of "meaningfulness" is first presented within a forest of nonsensical claims. Meaning is being held at a distance, i.e. the function of metonymy. As the frames tighten, anxiety builds. This is not just good for art, in that it allows for a nearly unlimited expansion of irrelevant but structurally useful circumstances,

details, episodes, etc. while at the same time building up tension around a central event that is not so much a resolution as a revelation; it is Hegelian retroaction, up close and personal. The forest of encounters is concussed, convulsed, and convoluted by retroaction, simultaneously matter and idea, form and formless.

Don't get the impression that sorites ends with a moment of resolution. Instead, the viewer is deprived of the detachment, the frame that has provided a sense of security. Sorites stages anxiety, and, as Lacan says in his first take on the subject, anxiety is staged with respect to a missing or empty location, and in the language of the uncanny. This empty location can be named: the "lipogram." You will know about

Georges Perec's novel, *A Void*, written without the letter 'e'.<sup>5</sup> I wish to take lipogram more generally and literally, as a "dia-gram about the void." This diagram also shows how the gap in Lacan's circle of desire/drive moves to different positions across the quadrated spaces of discourse (Master, University, Hysteria, Analysis). The lipogram also moves across the *matheme* of sexuation, where the four discourses are superimposed over the all, not-all, exception, and no-exception of men, the Big Other, the Woman, and no woman (Image 9). You can play with this, my point is to connect to the uncanny of art and ethnography, where, as Mladen Dolar explains, Lacan's means of relating psychoanalysis opens up the puzzles of art and cultural practices without having us turn into art historians.<sup>6</sup>

The ethnographical uncanny is for another day. The example I use here is Edgar Allan Poe's Lacanian short story "The Purloined Letter."<sup>7</sup> Sorites shows that Poe's design — basically a chiasmus of mirrored terms and sequences — is both a set of ever-tighter frames about a void, frames that "stage" anxiety, and a sorites machine running on Hegel-grade gasoline. Retroaction, in destroying the reader's traditional distance of suspended disbelief, produces a sudden over-proximity where the story itself, *in the specific experience of reading*, becomes a purloined letter. Poe is a witty writer in the purest traditions of Góngorismo (Image 10).<sup>8</sup>

### *The lambda shape of the lipogram*

Four cards, four ideas, one diagram, a diagram of something visible that resists visibility, a *lipo-diagram*, or lipogram for short. This is a picture of Poe's anxiety stage showing how the void circulates around language — the words of his-story — revealing that Poe repeats this pattern in his novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, the Marie Roget mysteries, and God knows where else. Amazingly, this lipogram — which reveals Poe's debt to Lacan — was not discovered, even by Lacan, until 2008, with Richard Kopley's analysis. "The Purloined Letter" is itself a *purloined letter!*

Poe's lipogram is shaped like the Greek letter lambda,  $\Lambda$ . The middle of the story is a turning point, located at the apex. In the story this is the point where the detective Dupin turns over the stolen letter he recovered from the evil Minister D—'s apartment without his knowledge, in exchange for a large reward. The left arm of the lambda contains a series of half-statements that will be "completed" by elements on the right arm. The left and right elements establish the theme of chirality and relation to the game of Morra that Poe references in the story and elsewhere in his discussions of the intersubjectivity that is the key to winning the game. (These references, by the way, resemble Lacan's example of the three prisoners who are offered the chance of release if they can guess whether they have a black or white dot from a set of five pinned to their back.)

<sup>5</sup> Georges Perec, *A Void*, trans. Gilbert Adair (London: Harvill, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> Mladen Dolar, "'I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night': Lacan and the Uncanny," *October*, 58, Rendering the Real (Autumn, 1991): 5–23.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Lacan, "Seminar on the Purloined Letter," *Écrits*, the first complete edition in English, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Luis de Góngora y Argote (1561–1621) is credited with a literary style that, through excess and studied obscurity, can be justified only in terms of the sorites tolerance for ornament, elaboration, and nonsense. In contrast to the *argute* wittiness of *conceptismo*, Góngorismo overwhelms its audiences with seemingly useless surpluses. Without it, the uncanny "detached virtuality" of the double, travel through time, the story within the story, or the contamination of reality by the dream or story would be unimaginable. Metalepsis and metonymy, whose effects depend on holding questions of meaning at a distance, depend on this kind of virtuality of frame manipulation. Thus, metaphor, which depends on conciseness and thus favors *conceptismo*, is contrasted with metalepsis/metonymy, which *requires* ornament, apparently useless detail, and the ridiculous. My more general claim is that *all art*, in that it is fictional, constitutes a human compulsion for surplus and, by extension, the Góngorist conception of uselessness, surplus, irrelevancy.

The left and right terms connect to form a ladder of ever-tighter frames around the pivot event at the apex (Image 11a). The apex, as *pure transaction*, is the gap of the circle of desire in that the purloined letter to be powerful must remain unread; the Minister must not know that it has been stolen to continue this potent aura — a dummy letter has been left in its place. It is not presence but absence which drives not just the logic of the story but the logic of the *techniques* used to tell the story. It is sorites that allows the left and right terms to mingle with other predications, to their Góngoresque heart's delight, and to have their other halves discovered after a delay. Delays play a key role: the delay between the delivery of the letter and the Minister's notice of the Queen's anxiety, the delay in finding the letter, and the delay of writing the letter and reading it, a delay never liquidated because the letter unread has power but the letter read does not. But, most important, sorites is the basis for the most basic delay of all, the delay of the audience in its *jouissance* of art.

Delay is a spring-loaded latch that keeps the past from overtaking the present, until the just-right moment when delay is itself realized as a sliding present, a past that shoots the past past the present into a future anterior. Here retroaction, *Gegenstoss*, is at its purest, and we can see how retroaction is the basis of the uncanny of the invisible within the visible, a soubriquet for the Lacanian gaze. Oops, that would be a fifth card.

The “one grain more” and “one hair less” of sorties, the “less than nothing” of Lacan's Hegelian essence, ties together diverse themes. A longer exposition would have time to connect this to practices in remote antiquity, where the pile of stones at crossroads initiated the practice of silent trade, allowing strangers wishing to avoid contact to evolve institutions of exchange and then religion (Image 11b). The subsequent harvest of insights into city foundation rituals, the consolidation of multiple hearth-based religions into Olympian state religion, and the evolution of modern speech and thought makes sorites into the one idea to have, if you're having only one (Image 11c).

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# Images

- Image 1. Lacan's "gapped circle" of desire; René Magritte, *Not to Be Reproduced* (*La reproduction interdite*, 1937). The death drive, as the basis for all subsequent drives, is driven by the displacement of aim by goal, an apparent straight line that uncannily curves around on itself. Confrontation of end with origin cannot be resolved, but the "gap" of this irresolution can be materialized through the devices of "detached virtuality" (time travel, the double, story in the story, contamination of reality by the dream or fiction).
- Image 2. Achilles cannot catch up with the tortoise or, alternatively, he can only overshoot its position because in effect he runs in a "different space time." Lacan thematizes this over-/undershoot in a variety of ways, including the metaphor of the missed opportunity. This has been anticipated by the Renaissance emblem of *Festina Lente*, or "make haste slowly," sometimes shown as a butterfly superimposed on a crab. The printer Aldus Manutius used an alternative characterization as the *impressa* of his famous printing house: an anchor embraced by a serpentine dolphin.
- Image 3. Lacan's *mathemes* of sexuation, simplified as a pattern of minuses and pluses; Lacan elaborated the "automatism" of these *mathemes* in a topology of three loops.
- Image 4. Lacan's "prisoners' dilemma," of having to guess whether the warden has placed a black or white dot on their backs, based on evidence of each seeing the color of the dots on the other two prisoners. The solution is not solely based on "game theory logic" but on radical intersubjectivity, i.e. of predicting how the other prisoner's would respond once they figured out the dots' distributions (all dots were white, the two black dots remained unused).
- Image 5. Lewis Carroll's sorites logic allows for an unlimited extension of predications ("a pile"), since the necessity of the pile's "contingency" is based on the idea of a palindromic remainder.
- Image 6. Carroll cultivated close friendships with children of his friends and neighbors. In 1856, shortly after taking up a mathematical lectureship at Oxford University, he purchased a camera and began taking photographs. Alice Liddell is credited with being the motivation for Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*.
- Image 7. Spencer-Brown's calculus restates Carroll's puzzle statements as subject and predicate pairs. Predicates, indicated as the interior of a frame, are "cancelled out" by their appearance elsewhere as subjects in some other predication.
- Image 8. Cancellation is a kind of delayed symmetry, a letter that has arrived at its destination (Lacan). The sorites answer is a predicate and subject that have been "remaindered" in that they lack this symmetry and are themselves joined to create the "solution predication." The elements they lack constitute a lipogram that, in a negative form, constitute the *objet petit a*.
- Image 9. Truth as a void "circulates" around the field of Agent, Other, Production, and Truth to construct the four discourses; this lipogram function correlates to the "bilateral diagrams" both of Carroll's non-Boolean logic and Lacan's *mathemes* of sexuation.
- Image 10. Lacan drew up a program connecting the four discourses with the sexuation *mathemes*. The bilateral diagram of sexuation is *already* and *always* an early kind of Spencer-Brown calculus.
- Image 11a. The left and right terms connect to form a ladder of ever-tighter frames around the pivot event at the apex.
- Image 11b. A pile of stones at crossroads initiated the practice of silent trade, allowing strangers wishing to avoid contact to evolve institutions of exchange and then religion.
- Image 11c. The marginal sites of silent trade were easily converted to *fora* serving the trading partners, a civic center managed by "undertakers" who, dealing in funerary services and divination, consolidated dispersed hearth-based religions under a single civic identity, a flame of a central collective hearth.