

WRITING

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INTRODUCTION WRITING AND THE “TALKING CURE”

michael stanish

Just as you cannot do algebra without knowing how to write, you cannot handle or parry even the slightest signifying effect without at least suspecting what is implied by writing.

— Jacques Lacan¹

The present issue of *Umbr(a)* aims to provide a space for the elaboration of the often-uninterrogated relation between writing and psychoanalysis. For, inasmuch as psychoanalysis is inextricably linked to the speaking subject, it nevertheless finds its origins and future firmly grounded in writing. Every psychoanalyst whose training is informed by Freud’s writing, every psychoanalytic critic who takes writing as his object of study, and anyone in any discipline who reads or writes in the name of psychoanalysis must eventually account for the following — deceptively simple — question: If psychoanalysis can rightly be called the “talking cure,” then why should it have anything at all to say about writing? The answer to this question will dictate not only *why* psychoanalysis can be brought to bear upon the question of writing — what, for example, characterizes writing as distinct

from speech or even the mark — but also *what* psychoanalysis enables one to think about writing, as distinct from any other possible discipline, method, or apparatus. Or, to put it another way, when choosing to bring the concepts, structures, and operations of psychoanalysis to bear upon writing, one must be prepared to account not only for the choice of psychoanalysis — “Why psychoanalysis?” — but also for the admissibility and relevance of the object — “Why writing?”

Indeed, if there is anything that makes psychoanalysis today uniquely situated to approach the question of writing it is the way in which it inherits — in a structurally irrevocable way — the distinction between speech and writing. Writing has been fundamentally, but almost paradoxically, implicated in psychoanalysis from the very outset. Freud became convinced of the existence of the unconscious through direct and repeated experience of its manifestations in the speech and acts of his analysands. However, in order for his singular discovery to be useful and convincing to others who had not had the benefit of direct experience he was compelled to write. This point cannot be emphasized enough: Psychoanalysis, as it exists today, is a direct consequence of the manner in which Freud translated and transmitted his clinical experience through the fundamentally incompatible register of writing. In his case histories, for example, Freud makes it abundantly clear that what he has written is by no means a wholly accurate or linear representation of the course of the analysis in question. What the reader experiences will not be identical to what Freud experienced. Yet Freud nevertheless writes with the expectation of producing the same *effect* in his reader: a repetition of his inaugural experience of the unconscious. As readers of Freud, we inherit a very specific relation to repetition, and that repetition cannot be unbound from the writing of which it is a consequence. In this sense, Freud’s writing has served, and continues to serve, as the base case for a peculiar sort of mathematical induction. Every reader must repeat the discovery of the unconscious and reinvent psychoanalysis, as if for the first time, while being constrained by nothing but the economy of Freud’s writing. This is the Freudian wager: that the psychoanalysis we invent by reading what he has written will be, somehow, the same psychoanalysis.

The clinical and critical apparatus of psychoanalysis, therefore, is fundamentally marked and differentiated from every other conceptual — even philosophical — system by the specific way in which it accounts for its own writing. Freud was compelled to engage in a specific act of writing as a consequence of the radical nature of his invention, just as Kant was forced to account for the way in which the *writing* of the moral law is determinative of freedom at the very same time that freedom is only revealed in writing the moral law; or, as *writing*, for Derrida, is the name for the unity of inscription “in general” at the very same time that the unity it names is only constituted in writing. Of course, any attempt to account for the writing of a coherent system within the writing of that very same system will necessarily end in failure. This is the fundamental insight of Gödel’s incompleteness theorem, that any substantial logical system of relations — and writing is both the necessary foundation for logic, as well as the primary means by which logical operations are carried out — can never be both consistent and complete, can never be both without contradiction and without lack. But the specific *way* that it fails, the fissures that are thereby opened up, can nevertheless produce something *new*. What emerges from the fissures that are opened up by Freud’s

specific economy of writing, then, is nothing other than the divided subject. The divided subject is the *only* subject at stake in psychoanalysis, it is its chief concern, and it is very much a consequence of the specificity of the relation between writing and psychoanalysis.

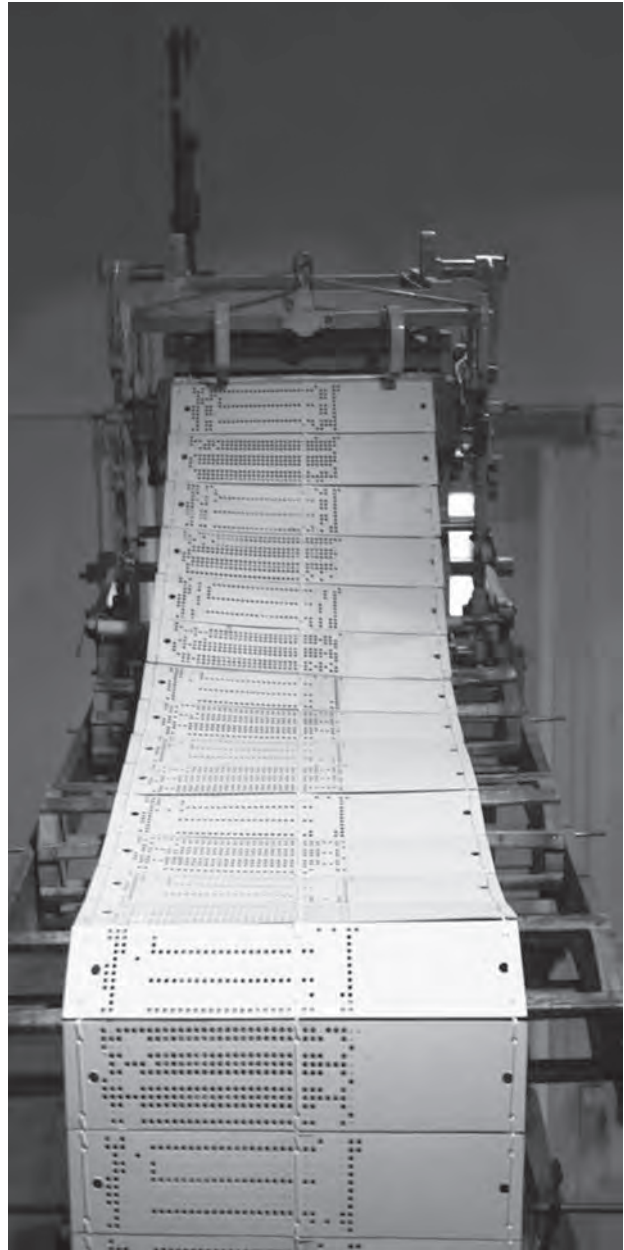
It must be stated, at this point, that our task in this issue owes a great debt to Shoshana Felman's work in the seminal issue of *Yale French Studies* on "Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading — Otherwise," which was a response to the one-sided nature of questions concerning "literature and psychoanalysis."² Literature, as she argued, was essentially and almost universally submitted to the mastery of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis sought to find itself confirmed anew with each and every interpretation of a literary text, without ever staging the encounter in reverse (*à l'invers*, as Lacan would have it). Felman assumed the formidable task of asking what, if anything, does literature have to teach psychoanalysis? It is also necessary to be mindful of a similar dynamic at play in our present consideration of writing and psychoanalysis.

If writing is able to teach psychoanalysis anything, it is surely to be found in its profoundly *logical* nature. Lacan exploited this nature to great effect with his mathemes, those "little machines that you can turn around through ninety degrees and *get results*. They are not latent, my little letters on the blackboard, they are manifest."³ These "little machines" are able to function on their own and get results precisely because, as Lacan will emphasize, they are essentially *logical*. A logical proposition, simply by virtue of being written down, *works*. We do not write $p \rightarrow q = r$, because $p \rightarrow q$ is automatically resolved in the act of writing: $p \rightarrow q$ does not equal anything, it simply *is* another way of writing true or false. As Lacan argues skillfully in Seminar XVIII,

it is only by starting from writing that logic is established. [...] There is no logical question unless it starts from writing, insofar as writing is precisely not language. It is in this sense that I have said there is no metalanguage. Writing itself, inasmuch as it is distinguished from language, is there in order to show us that if it is from writing that language is able to interrogated, it is precisely to the extent writing is not language, but that it is only constructed, only fabricated by its reference to language.⁴

Psychoanalysis, as Lacan recognized clearly, has much to learn from writing. The conjunction of "writing and psychoanalysis" is a path that leads in both directions, and both have thus far been poorly trodden. Unlike Lacan's "little machines," the task of thinking does not work on its own, is not manifest, and does not produce automatic results. One must clear the brush oneself. It is our sincere hope that the constellation of texts that follow will help make significant gains in clearing the conceptual pathway that connects writing and psychoanalysis.

1. Jacques Lacan, "The Situation of Psychoanalysis and the Training of Psychoanalysts in 1956," in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 393.
2. See Shoshana Felman, "To Open the Question," in *Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading — Otherwise*, ed. Shoshana Felman (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 5-10.
3. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 113; emphasis added.
4. Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XVIII: D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant, 1970-1971*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 2006), 64-65.





PRACTICES OF THE LETTER WRITING A SPACE FOR THE REAL

Lucie cantin

Writing is the memory of humanity and the deposit of its knowledge. It houses the traces left by past civilizations and spoken languages, sealed beneath an enigmatic chain of signs that must be decrypted in order to access the existence and heritage of the disappeared peoples who made use of them. It is said that “history is born with writing, by placing events in a chronological framework for the first time”; that “writing allowed the ancient Egyptians to record their own history, to establish lists of their leaders, to recount important events, royal marriages, or battles”; that it also allows for accounting, as with the first Sumerians, to establish juridical rules, to draw up contracts for the sale of goods as well as marriages; and that it is “the medium of literature [...], [from] moral maxims, to hymns to the gods and kings, historical tales and adventure novels, love songs, epic poetry and fables.”¹¹ In short, writing fabricates history, producing and establishing the discourses that serve as a foundation for meaning. It ensures the transmission of the myths and narratives that determine and delimit a space of possible and shared significations. In the service of coexistence, it governs the relation to the other and becomes a mnemonic aid, an accounting tool, and the support of the law. In this way, it becomes a witness to the speech it inscribes, materializes, fixes, and transforms into a text that engages its author in his articulation to the civic body.

Although Voltaire has called it “the painting of the voice,” writing — which, in the present instance, is first and foremost made to be a messenger — submits the voice to the signifier, speech to language, and, as a result, it orders, organizes, structures, and transmits a certain content. If we first recognize that, “for tens of thousands of years there were many means of conveying simple messages using drawings, signs, or pictures,” then we will have to acknowledge that “writing [...], in the true sense of the word, cannot be said to exist until there is an agreed-upon repertoire of formal signs or symbols that can be used to reproduce clearly the thoughts and feelings the writer wishes to express.”²

In all of these senses, writing is both the ink and the anchor (*l'encre/l'ancre*) of meaning. Writing is a practice of the signifier, the very signifier of which it would be the trace, which is apprehended in terms of the signification that it both transports and consigns — by virtue of becoming the representation of words, the bearer of meaning and signs — to the interior of the fields of language and the visible in which the social link is anchored. At this point, then, writing expresses and says something. It becomes the site of a transformation, a passage from the voice and the uncertainty of speech to the fixity of the text, which thereby restricts and defines its meaning. The way a child learns to write provides an excellent illustration of this moment of passage from the polysemy of what is heard to a closure of signification imposed by writing it down. Poetry traverses this same path in the opposite direction when it works upon the signifier until it becomes the echo of the voice, the “*passseur*” and bearer of the drive, which allows what cannot be said to nonetheless be heard — namely, the inaccessible real that the signifier of language sutures through the signification that is attached to it. This passage from the voice to writing, from the real to the symbolic, from the audible to the visible, is certainly not without resonance with the notion of religious texts or holy books. With such inspired texts, which were established through dictation, writing thus becomes — as the word “hieroglyph” signifies — “the writing of the gods”: “The prophet Mohammed is believed to have recorded the word of Allah directly, with no intermediary.”³ These holy books speak of an Elsewhere — an inaccessible place other than visible social reality, a real — but their function is to contain this place, supported by the work of the exegetes who narrow down and close off its possible significations and interpretations. This Elsewhere, the return of the real rejected by language, would thus be restricted and controlled within the text itself and, concomitantly, included and incorporated into a shared symbolic space.

But for all this, what defines writing, as we will approach it here, is precisely that which, on a fundamental level, distinguishes it from speech and discourse. We are interested in the place where writing, much like the formula in mathematical writing, is disanchored from the signifier and cannot be told, constitute the object of a narrative, or recuperated in a history. Consequently, this writing no longer refers to a signification, but it becomes, rather, the means of approximating an inaccessible real. Writing becomes the instrument for calculating the real. What characterizes mathematical discourse “according to the most qualified logicians,” Lacan reminds us, “is that it is possible that, at one point or another, we may no longer be able to give it any meaning, which precisely does not prevent it from being developed with the most rigor of all of the discourses.”⁴ The function of writing appears clearly here. No longer does

writing translate a thought or express what was or can be said, thereby conveying and sustaining meaning. Instead, it provides access to something that would otherwise be inaccessible. These are the precise terms in which we will consider writing, from the symptom as the writing of a jouissance, to the act as the writing and opening up of a space for the return of the real — an act that both supposes and supports the phallus.

THE REAL: WHAT ESCAPES REPRESENTATION IS CALCULATED AND CIRCUMSCRIBED BY WRITING

The real is what escapes the symbolic, forming its excluded, rejected, and unrepresented remainder. Language produces a system for representing mental objects without referents in reality — myths, ideals, beliefs, laws, prohibitions — and thereby links the being to a symbolic space in which the receivable and the possible, as Willy Apollon has called them, are established. The receivable and the possible — comprised of various discourses and representations — define the necessary conditions for coexistence and the exigencies confronting the subject in his binding to the social link. As a result, they necessarily reject something that the subject truly experiences but that has been excluded from language. Representation thus gives rise to lack; through the process of naming, the symbolic carves out and produces the real as its own remainder.

The real is also that which is irreducible to the signifier, that to which the logic of speech and discourse are unable to give us access. And yet, the human mind insistently leads us toward this real, both in and through writing, but without ever reducing it. Mathematical writing is certainly the most eloquent illustration of this point. Einstein, using the formal logic made possible by mathematical writing, calculated and established laws for the functioning of an inaccessible real, which was imperceptible to the senses as well as the technical instruments of the day. Indeed, it would only be possible to verify these laws fifty years later, since at the time he established them he had only two sets of tools at his disposal. On the one hand, he had his own creativity, “intuition,” and desire as a physicist, which guided and pushed him toward a hallucinated mental object that existed for no one but himself. On the other, he also possessed the means of inquiry made possible by mathematical writing, namely formulas, whose little letters, with no signification, link and assert themselves in a logic that functions completely outside the will or imaginary of their author. This is what is at work in the calculation of the expansion of the universe or the behavior of atoms, as well as in quantum physics and mathematics at large. These are all places where writing allows for the calculation of a real and the establishment of its rationality in a series of laws that will consequently render possible and thinkable a number of things that were hitherto impossible and unthinkable.

The real is what escapes representation. Our attempts to grasp the infinitely large and the infinitely small are perfect illustrations of the radical inadequacy of any system of representation in comparison

with what remains inaccessible, outside of the perceptible and visible fields, and therefore beyond what can be imagined. In an interview with Jean Staune, the philosopher, mathematician, and physicist Bernard d'Espagnat criticizes the way we depict atoms as having a nucleus composed of tiny balls (neutrons and protons) with electrons spinning around it. "It's very attractive," he says, "very easy to understand...but completely false! Here is the essential contribution of quantum physics: the fundamental constituents of objects are no longer objects; we are witnessing a dematerialization of matter."⁵ Expanding on this notion, d'Espagnat continues,

Statements in quantum physics are of the form "we" did this and "we" observed that. In this manner, the "we" — the human observer — is part of that statement. It is a question of a statement with weak objectivity. And yet, despite certain attempts, it seems impossible to avoid such statements when we want to describe the foundations of matter. That is why we don't have access to the real in itself when we carry out a scientific analysis, but rather to the empirical real. That is why the true real is beyond physics, beyond any perceptions we could have, and beyond any measurements we could make with the most sophisticated instruments that exist or could ever be produced in the future.⁶

When Staune retorts, "but how, then, can we represent an atom for ourselves?" d'Espagnat replies, "We have to know how to manage without representation! But don't worry, allegories can help us there."⁷ These remarks touch directly upon what interests us here. Not only is there something immeasurable, invisible, and inaccessible to both the senses and the instrumentation that extends their reach, but the very representation of what eludes visibility is also misleading and cut off from the thing itself, which resists all apprehension.

Allegory and metaphor do not claim to express the real. They outline, evoke, and delimit it. They demonstrate the very impossibility of saying anything by invoking a thing whose presence cannot be grasped by the system of representations provided by language. Poetry provides us with a wonderful example of this whenever it takes something that has never before been heard and renders it audible for the first time. Poetic writing works upon and shapes language; it detaches the signifier from the signification ascribed to it in language in order to make the real of the drive at work in the author's body resonate there. Consequently, it produces truth-effects that are recognizable in the aesthetic emotion that poetic writing causes to surge forth. Poetry is a practice of writing; indeed, it is a practice of approximating the real. The signifier neither tells a story nor constructs a history; it simply evokes, it "tells the truth" by feeding off of the energy of the drive and articulating itself to the letter of the body. It opens a space between words for the return of the real. This is what makes poetry so difficult to translate, for the passage from one language to another necessitates the clever discovery of metaphors with an equivalent evocative power and resonance.

The subject of the unconscious is a real. It is rejected by the symbolic and its essence remains unrepresented by the signifier that, within the visible space of the social link, is merely the *semblant* that serves to identify the character substituted for the subject's being. The subject's singularity, his truth, is located in the gap opened up by representation. Such a subject is a real; it is accessible only in and through the writing of its effects and manifestations that, in turn, permit its outline to be traced and its truth to be approached. This is, moreover, the very nature of the Freudian unconscious. It is constituted by that which is unable to be represented or symbolized but nonetheless remains there, stranded, inscribed in the body — and, as a result, it is constantly at work, ready to be remobilized and reactivated by the chance encounters of life. Likewise, the analysand can only experience the unconscious through experiences of the real, those moments when he accesses what is inscribed within him and acts according to an entirely different logic than the one that governs his history in the visible space and imaginary register wherein he has hitherto gained his bearings. One analysand, for example, testified to this encounter with the subject within her. She was struck by “a thought that became very clear,” “the thought that I had been raped. [...] I don't think that someone restrained me and raped me. But even if that never took place, it's clear that it is my experience [...], it is what is inscribed within me.” In the course of her cure she will recover the “constructed” memories and trivial gestures that were, nevertheless, the source of what was thus inscribed in her as the certainty of having been raped — a certainty she was staging in each of her psychotic episodes through a series of acts ordered by the rationality of the previously unknowable real inscribed within her.

Thus, what has been excluded, rejected from the symbolic and inscribed in the letter of the body, is still at work in the symptom, the failed act, the acting out, the staging, and the crisis — each of which returns it to the space from which it is excluded. Quietly and independently of all volition, the drive is in quest of a jouissance that — for lack of being able to be said — will find in the act, symptom, and staging a pathway and form where the fantasy that subtends this jouissance is written in its own encoded, encrypted, and self-contained language. Any access to the unconscious, therefore, must necessarily pass through the writings inscribed in these manifestations of the real, which are deployed according to a rationality that needs to be decrypted. The logic inscribed by these writings, however, is altogether different from the one that the analysand organizes — namely, the neurotic's narrative, the psychotic's delusion, or the pervert's scenario — in order to sustain his discourse and interpretations. This other logic can only be deduced, calculated, or inferred. Musical writing offers us a clarifying analogy on this point: Despite the fact that the same graphic signs have been used in musical writing through the ages, regardless of genre, it is possible to discern “two radically different principles governing their usage.”⁸ Either “it is the *work*, the composition itself, which is put into writing,” or “it is the *execution* of the work that is indicated, the notation being essentially an indication of what and how it should be played [...]. [T]he work then ‘materializes,’ so to speak, from the act of playing.”⁹ In this sense, tablatures provide a notation for the positioning of the fingers on certain instruments. They do not graphically represent the work but rather indicate how it should be played: “These diagrams show the precise positioning of the fingers necessary to produce the required chords (on a lute, for example), in such a way that the music comes into existence when the notes are

sounded. When one examines a fingering diagram, one cannot imagine the sounds produced, one sees only the positions. This is an extreme case of notation in the sense of an indication of playing method.”¹⁰ Here, what is written is not what is heard. It is necessary to go through the indicated playing method, to follow it to the letter on an instrument in order to gain access to the music. So too is it the case with the symptom, which is not a translation of some signification to which we could have direct access, but rather it is the writing of a logic that must be enacted and reconstructed as such. This logic, in the same manner as musical tablature, provides access to the jouissance harbored in the symptom.

The astrophysicist establishes the laws and functioning of the real in a formal logic of writing, which in turn makes new things and new interventions possible. In much the same way, what is at stake in an analytic cure is not the eradication of the real that returns in the symptom but access to the rationality at work therein. Only then is it possible to assume responsibility for this real, including in the acts that open up a space and inaugurate the possible forms for the inscription of the subjective truth that was rejected by the symbolic.

THE WOLF MAN; OR, TRACKING THE REAL IN THE WRITINGS THAT BETRAY ITS RATIONALITY

The clinical case study of the Wolf Man is where Freud is most often criticized for having let himself stray into baseless reconstructions of his own making, taxed by certain quasi-delusional elaborations. Even so, for us it constitutes his most exemplary clinical text on the question of the letter — that which is inscribed and written in the body and the visible field, for lack of being able to be represented by the signifier. Freud imposes the utmost rigor upon himself in this text by tracking every manifestation of the real until he is able to extract the repetitive form behind each occurrence. Only then does he proceed to construct the fantasy that, like a mathematical formula, accounts for the logic and rationality governing the work of jouissance. In this respect, Freud proceeds like the detective or archeologist who, starting from clues, traces, and “remainders,” constructs what could have been or could have taken place. The difference, however, is that the “reality” of this construction, like the allegory characterizing the atom, lies in a space outside the perceptible and the measurable, and it is established according to laws and a rationality proper to the singular experience of the subject.

Commenting on Seminar XVIII and “Lituraterre,” Jacques-Alain Miller notes that, for Lacan, “the letter introduces a break in the cohesion of the system of the *semblant*.”¹¹ Lacan illustrates this point, he explains, by “evoking the *semblant* as clouds, those atmospheric phenomena indicated by Descartes himself as what one must not fall for. And so, Lacan talks about how the rain — which represents writing — punctures these clouds, producing the furrows it carves into the ground — which metaphorizes the real — through gully erosion. Writing, here, comes down in a rain shower.”¹² With the Wolf Man, Freud follows

the real in the letter, its traces, and any place where it makes a hole in the logic of discourse, irrupting into the body or the life of the patient. Thus, he dwells on the movement of the drive and the navel of the dream, following anxiety as a signal of, and defense against, the emergence of the real. He stays fast to the letters of the body involved in the symptom, the repetition of an inscribed and insistent form, the traits of the object of the phobia, as well as those of the object capable of triggering the drive of desire, and the parts of the body implicated in his obsessions and rituals. In short, Freud pursues everything that conveys, indicates, outlines, or writes the work of a jouissance that cannot be represented.

It is from these precise indices — which reintroduce what had been rejected, censored, and unrepresented by the signifier — that Freud begins working to extract a logical form, a fantasy, that is impossible to access except by way of these writings of the real. By following the links between these various manifestations in their points of confirmation, logical intersections, and repetitions, he deduces the rationality that gives its proper form to each of these expressions of the work of jouissance. It is useful here to consider the procedure employed in those logic puzzles wherein once the construction has been completed, the accuracy, validity, and truth of a solution can be cross-checked by testing it against the problem statements, all of which must evaluate as true. The deduction of the logic of the fantasy — which gives form to the writings in which the real returns — is of the same order: Once established, the formula of the fantasy must be able to account for the entirety of its writings. Freud proceeds as though he were the decipherer of a writing whose language is no longer spoken. He is faced with a body of signs and must work without being able to rely on anything other than the play of traces in their articulation to one another. John Chadwick, a friend and research partner of Michael Ventris — who succeeded in deciphering Linear B, the Cretan writing system that remained enigmatic until the middle of the twentieth century — paid homage to him by accurately summarizing his genius, which is characteristic of all decipherers. “Ventris,” he said, “was able to see, in the confusing diversity of these signs, an overall pattern and to pinpoint certain constants that revealed the underlying structure. It was this quality — being able to make order out of apparent confusion — that is the sign of greatness among the scholars in this field.”¹³ This comment applies perfectly not only to Freud’s work with the Wolf Man, but also to an analyst’s work in the cure — for, as Apollon stresses, the stakes of the cure are that the real finds its rationality.

There are a number of underlying principles behind Freud’s work in the Wolf Man case, which we could outline in three general movements as follows: First, what is foreclosed and rejected by the symbolic and the social link, and thus inscribed in the body to constitute the unconscious, can only be calculated by way of the forms in which the real returns; second, a logical structure and a particular rationality organize this return of the censored; and, third, by starting with the logic deduced from the forms assumed by the return of the real, a fantasy can then be constructed in order to account for an originary trauma — a trauma that is only accessible through the traces it has left behind and the inscription of its effects and consequences.

Freud begins by focusing on what is presented as the Wolf Man's first symptomatic manifestation in childhood: an abrupt change of character, which took the form of fits of rage and anger directed mainly at his father and Nanya. When Freud wrote this case history — at about the same time he wrote “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes” — he was interested in the satisfaction sought by the drive. Accordingly, he follows the trajectory of the drive's investment through its apparent changes in aim and object in search of the structure that, despite these detours and reversals, repeats itself and reveals the truth hidden in the symptom. By following the movements of the drive as it assumes various forms, Freud arrives at the following conclusion: The Wolf Man is in a feminine position in his relation to his father, and the fits of rage directed at him stage, in an inverted fashion, the fantasy of being chastised by the father and beaten on the penis. Two pieces of material serve as the foundation for Freud's hypothesis about the disguised jouissance reintroduced by the symptom. On the one hand, there are key memories in which the child is in a passive position; for example, when he is seduced by his sister, who touched him on the penis, or when he is the object of Nanya's threats forbidding onanism, that is, touching his penis. On the other hand, there is the anxiety triggered by the sight of a horse being beaten and the daydream in which he imagines “boys being chastised and beaten, especially being beaten on the penis.”¹⁴ The Wolf Man's fits of rage toward his father constitute, in a staging that takes place within the social link, the writing of the jouissance coiled up in the fantasy of being beaten and taken by the father. This jouissance is expressed, in an encoded fashion, through a reversal of both the aim and the object of the drive. In the fantasy, the object of the child's rage — the father — becomes the agent of the aggressive action, and the apparently sadistic aim of the anger directed at his father masks a masochistic jouissance: The child inflicts on his father the very aggression-jouissance of which he desires to be the object. In this sense, we can see that the Wolf Man's symptom — his fits of rage — is an authentic form of writing, a staged production that uses the body and the relation to the other as tools to express and maintain the jouissance of an unspeakable fantasy.

By the same token, the point at which anxiety emerges serves as a beacon for Freud when he interrogates the dream that precipitates the development of the Wolf Man's phobia. And beyond the various associations and significant representations produced by the dream work, Freud is particularly interested in the point of the real in the dream, its anxiety point. This marks the place where the drive is unable to find a suitable representation and thus continues to work upon the body; the impression of the dream's “reality” bears witness to this continuance, for it persists well beyond the moment of waking up. The dream is only of interest in analysis insofar as it refers to a real that it cannot quite represent; for it is here that the dream stifles the dreamer's impulse to construct a narrative. To this end, it provides only some ragged element, some remainder, which is impossible to recuperate and knot together into a narrative framework. This is exactly what one psychotic analysand discovered at the end of the work he had just completed on his dream, when he so accurately observed, “there is always a feeling or a theme that emerges from the dream which has nothing to do with the rest of the dream. I mentioned the friend of mine who is there in the dream, and my memories with him, but what doesn't fit with everything else in the dream is the fact that he is terrifying in it. That's the feeling that stayed with me, and I don't know why it is present in this dream.” The analysand does an excellent job here of identifying the real in his dream,

namely that which, although disjoined and unrepresented in the signifier, is mobilized in the letter of his body.

The anxiety-provoking element in the Wolf Man's dream, then, is the approach of something that the dream does not actually say. Rather, something entirely different leaves him with this feeling long after he has woken up: the perfect immobility of the wolves and the strained attention with which they stare at him in the dream. This bit of real (*bout de reel*) is condensed and contained in the drawing of the wolves, with their ears erect in the shape of the inverted Roman numeral "V." Freud relies on this point, treating it as the opening of a path that leads to some unknown thing hidden by the content of the dream. An unspeakable truth is to be found there, exactly where the signifying representation encounters its limit. The emphasis the Wolf Man places on the wolves' strained attention and immobility points toward something unrepresented that has been revived in the dreamer's body, namely a real that he cannot integrate into a narrative. Thus, Freud hypothesizes the existence of an unknown scene, lost to oblivion, whose effects are inscribed in the letter of the body. Its mnemonic traces record the trauma of an encounter with *jouissance* that causes an effraction and sets the drive to work in the child's body.

The dream leads Freud to specific points of the real, which confirm his hypothesis by pointing to specific elements of a scene/fantasy. First, the image of the wolf standing upright with its claws outstretched and its ears erect, an image drawn from a children's story that was once an object of panic for the Wolf Man, insofar as the anxiety resulting from the dream is due precisely to the wolf's "upright posture" (39). Second, his grandfather's story about the tailor who hit the wolf with his stick and pulled off its tail, a scene that certainly recalls the fantasy of being beaten on the penis by his father. Third, the image of the wolves mounted on top of one another, an exact reproduction of the anxiety-inducing position of the upright wolf. And, finally, the Wolf Man's failed act — he draws only five (V) wolves in the tree, even though he speaks of six or seven. Together, these associations outline the place of an unspeakable *jouissance*, but for Freud they also confirm the elements of a logic that begins to take shape: the child as the object of the father-wolf-predator, the wolf who "mounts" another wolf, and the repetition of the Roman numeral "V."

Freud continues to work on the elements of this logic by applying the same processes of transformation and displacement as those employed by the trajectory of the drive in the production of symptoms: the reversal into their opposite and the substitution of subject for object. In so doing, he arrives at the conclusion that the wolves' striking immobility signifies the opposite, a violent motion, and the strained attention with which they look at him refers, rather, to his own gaze staring at something with rapt attention.

The Wolf Man's rituals and obsessions point Freud to the specific writing of the real at work in the child's body, the real constituted by the eroticized and perverted body parts that have been diverted from their primary functions by a hidden *jouissance*. Hence, he performs rituals of inspiration and expiration at the sight of unwell elderly people who remind him of his father; he is obsessively preoccupied with

the subject of God, posing questions like “Did Christ have a behind?” and “Did Christ shit too?”; and obsessional thoughts, such as “God-shit” and “God-swine,” impose themselves upon him. All of these symptomatic manifestations stage a scene involving the father and indicate that the letters of the body — the behind, the anal zone — are mobilized by the drive in its quest for a satisfaction in the symptom. These sites of bodily inscription, which seem to house the work of a jouissance, find themselves confirmed by the exceptionally stubborn bodily symptoms that continue to impair the Wolf Man into adulthood. He suffers from intestinal disorders — constipation, diarrhea, intestinal pain — just like his mother, with whom he identifies in the symptom. As Freud observes, “his feminine attitude towards men” — his feminine position as the object of coitus *a tergo* with the father — “which had been repudiated by the act of repression, drew back, as it were, into the intestinal symptoms” (80). Indeed, well into his adulthood these intestinal troubles were treated with the frequent administration of enemas by a male attendant, a scene that literally stages his feminine position in a coitus *a tergo* with his father, whose own heavy breathing demonstrates that jouissance was being staged in the ritual.

At this point, a logical principle — a fantasy — finally comes to light, giving a proper logical form to the ways in which the censored returns. Specific letters of the body are mobilized by the work of the drive in its quest for an unrepresentable jouissance, which the writing of the symptom is at once actualizing and concealing. Fresh pieces of information and new expressions of the real now permit Freud to further verify the correctness of his hypothesis. The Wolf Man tells him that once, when chasing butterflies, he was overcome by a terrible fear and ran away screaming at the sight of one with yellow stripes and wings with pointed tips (89). He clarifies that the object of his fear was the opening and closing of the butterfly’s wings, and that the butterfly was harmless once it had landed. The movement of the wings clearly form a V that, when opening and closing, replicated the opening and closing of a woman’s legs. The yellow-striped butterfly, whose colors reminded him of a certain type of pear, then led the Wolf Man to the name “Grusha,” the word for “pear” in his native language, but also, and more importantly, the name of his first nursery-maid. In this hitherto forgotten memory the Wolf Man is two and a half years old, and Grusha, who is crouched on all fours washing the floor, teases and scolds the child, who had urinated on the floor. Did he urinate out of fear from having been scolded? Out of excitement at the sight of the maid’s posture? Or for both reasons at the same time? This is a question that can, at this point, only find its answer on the side of the real. As an adult, the Wolf Man experiences what Freud calls compulsive attacks of falling in love. Whenever a woman is in a kneeling or crouching position, with her buttocks prominent and available — a posture that imitates an inverted V quite well — an irrepressible drive of desire is triggered in him. “To copulate except from behind,” Freud adds, “gave him scarcely any enjoyment” (41). The patient talks about two such “attacks” of falling in love. In the first instance he instantly fell in love with a young peasant girl, before even having seen her face, when he saw her kneeling near a pond doing her laundry. In the second instance, and in the very same manner, his desire came to life at the sight of a peasant girl kneeling on the ground washing the floor — exactly as in the memory of his childhood maid. The trait (the behind with prominent buttocks) that determines his object-choice, and that is necessary in order to trigger his sexual drive, confirms the correctness of Freud’s construction on two counts. First, it verifies the letters

of the erotogenic body. Second, it confirms the sight of a coitus *a tergo*, which Freud places at the center of a primal scene that determines the subject's position in relation to jouissance. This position could be formulated as "How nice it would be to be a kneeling woman, mounted by the erect father-wolf as he takes her from behind."

FROM AN ENCRYPTED WRITING OF THE REAL...

Freud could be criticized, of course, for doing the work that should have been left to the analysand; consequently, the failure of the Wolf Man's treatment, not surprisingly, has been emphasized time and again. It is not at all obvious, however, that Freud's decision to publish the evolution of a given clinical case has anything to do with the treatment's success or failure. Rather, it seems that, from among the vast number of his clinical cases, he selects those whose teaching would advance the construction of analytic *savoir*; this forever remained the primary object of both his concern and desire. From this perspective, what Freud outlines admirably for us in this text is the status of the unconscious as it concerns the real, which is outside of the signifier. It is impossible to access this real, or the rationality at work therein, without passing through writing and decoding that portion of real jouissance that ceaselessly writes itself for lack of being able to represent itself in the signifier. This is what we call the "writings of the real": the forms with which the drive, seeking satisfaction, mobilizes the letter of the body and, in a self-enclosed language, actualizes an unspeakable jouissance in the symptom or social space.

The symptom is irrecoverable in a narrative, and its signification eludes direct grasp. It sustains an inadmissible and unrepresentable jouissance, which both hides and expresses itself in such a way that it remains inaccessible to consciousness. Emphasizing this dimension of the symptom, Lacan explains that the "symptom is, in its nature, jouissance [...]. It is on the order of what I have taught you to recognize as jouissance in distinction from desire, namely that in having passed through the barrier of the good, [...] which is to say the pleasure principle, it moves towards the Thing."¹⁵

The stakes of an analysis thus cannot aim at the eradication of that which, like the symptom, writes an unspeakable truth concerning the subject's relation to the real at work within him. This is the point at which it is most apparent that the analytic cure is an ethical practice, one essentially concerned with the subject's position with respect to the jouissance that constitutes him in the truest sense. Psychoanalysis aims at lifting the silence in which the subject conceals himself with the symptom in order that the truth of unconscious desire might appear and be fully assumed in the subject's acts and commitments.

This passage, for Freud, from the symptom to the fantasy — that is, the passage to *savoir* about the rationality of the real at work in the symptom — lies at the heart of the analytic experience and is indissociable from the ethical stakes borne by the phallus, which gives desire its signifying form and constitutes the condition under which any act of the subject may occur. Insofar as the phallus is the

signifier of lack and desire — the expression in the symbolic of something that has no place there — it is inseparable from the question of the act. The act of the subject is defined here as emerging from another place, and it sustains those objects that accord neither with the ideals derived from parental exigencies nor with social norms. The phallus supposes and sustains an act that is not without a subject; it is not, as in the case of a symptom, the writing of an unassumed jouissance. The ethical act fully assumes responsibility for the unrepresentable jouissance enclosed in the symptom, which thereby transforms and opens it up to the possibility of other forms. This kind of act feeds on the object of desire, which is thus decanted of the jouissance of the Other that was borne in the symptom. It is signed with the mark of a desire whose subject bears both its consequences and effects in the social link. Lacking an address or a demand, making no appeal to the Other, the act originates not in the ego but in the real of a subject who authorizes himself in this very same act.

Lacan provides some particularly illuminating indications on the question of the act. In Seminar X, he makes a radical distinction between *acting out* (a term he preserves in English) and *passage à l'acte*, which he illustrates through references to Freud's *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* and "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman." He observes that all of Dora's paradoxical behavior with respect to the K.'s marriage comprises an acting out, whereas the slap triggered by Herr K.'s unfortunate statement — "I get nothing out of my wife" — is a *passage à l'acte*.¹⁶ The same is true with the case of the young homosexual woman: If all of the young girl's scandalous conduct with the beloved lady is an acting out, then her suicide attempt — which takes place when she is walking with the lady and encounters her father — is a *passage à l'acte*.¹⁷ Lacan stresses the demonstrative character of acting out and, concomitantly, the appeal and address to the Other contained therein. "Acting out," he specifies, "is essentially something that is displayed in the subject's behavior. The demonstrative accent in any acting out, its orientation towards the Other, is something that needs to be emphasized [...]. And what shows itself there is essentially shown to be other than what it is. What it in fact is, no one knows, but the fact that it is other than this is something that no one doubts."¹⁸ He continues this development by noting that "when you look at things closely, the majority of the time you will notice that the subject knows full well that what he does in acting out is done in order to offer itself up to your interpretation" (149). In a certain sense, then, acting out is the cinematic editing, the theatrical set, the staging, which both reveals and conceals something at the same time. The *passage à l'acte*, by contrast, is a true act, one in which the subject suddenly appears, lifting a portion of the veil that covers over a truth that, although it remains unseen, is indicated as something different from what is displayed in acting out. Thus, the slap that escapes from Dora's hand introduces Freud to a truth that the entire organization of her behavior had hitherto prevented him from grasping: Is she in love with Herr or Frau K.?

The *passage à l'acte* is not in the same register as acting out; instead, it is on the side of the real, a flight of the subject. Having exited from the demand addressed to the Other, it requires neither the approval nor the interpretation, participation, or recognition of the Other. Lacan, in his discussion of the young homosexual woman, clearly specifies the structure of the *passage à l'acte*:

If you take a look at the formula for the fantasy, the *passage à l'acte* is situated on the subject's side, insofar as the subject seems to be maximally effaced by the bar. The moment of the *passage à l'acte* is a moment of the most profound embarrassment for the subject, which is accompanied by the behavioral addition of emotion in the form of a movement disorder. In this sense, from where the subject currently stands — namely, the only place on stage where, as a fundamentally historicized subject, it can persist in its subjective status — it hurls itself and falls offstage. (136)

Moreover, according to Lacan, “The subject moves in the direction of escaping from the stage. This is what allows us to recognize the *passage à l'acte* for its proper value, and to differentiate it from what is entirely different, namely, acting out” (137). Lacan gives us another example, this time evoking the concept of fugue: “What is this thing we call fugue on the part of the subject who, always placed more or less in an infantile position, throws himself into it? — if not this exiting the stage, this wandering departure into the pure world where the subject goes off in search of, or hopes to meet, something which is everywhere rejected and refused” (137). As he continues, “the essential distinction between these two registers is the following — on the one hand you have the world, the place the real is rushing to, and on the other hand, the scene of the Other, where man as subject has to constitute himself, to assume his place as he who speaks, but can only do so in a structure which, however authentic it claims to be, is a fictional structure” (137).

An analysand, Mr. A., recalled this experience magnificently when he told us about a recent experience. He was talking calmly on the phone with his friend — a friend about whom he had mixed feelings — when suddenly, as he told us, “I shouted ‘you’re crazy!’ and I hung up.” He tried to explain the strangeness of this unforeseeable, spontaneous, and feckless act, which had simply slipped out: “All of a sudden, it was as if I had fallen into a black hole inside my head. I was scared, and I screamed without planning to. It was as though my usual control over consciousness had disappeared.” When asked to try to say more, he added, “these gestures are doing the talking. I’m well aware that there is a certain value in these gestures, at least an indicative value. It makes me sad to think about it. Basically, I’m only alive for a few seconds a year, the rest is automatism.” His gesture is a *passage à l'acte*. The subject of the drive — necessarily outside of the scene, out of bounds, outside the law — acts; it performs an act that makes the real — a truth that has been excluded, rejected from the scene — suddenly emerge. In this sense, the *passage à l'acte* is an authentic act, but it is an act that lacks a fully present signature. The truth expressed and unveiled in the act demands to be sustained, in its full extent and consequence, in a fresh act supported by the phallus — an act that bears the responsibility for what it engenders.

...TO A PRACTICE OF THE LETTER SUPPORTED BY THE PHALLUS

These remarks lead us precisely to where we intend to focus the question of the act as a practice of the letter. Art, especially theater, is without a doubt one of the privileged grounds on which to approach this question, for theatrical staging constitutes a genuine writing. Through the act, gesture, voice, rhythm, and movement of bodies in space, the staging gives form to something that the text not only does not but also cannot supply. Theatrical writing renders emotion and feeling visible and attempts to express anxiety and fear; in short, it explodes the text by opening it onto a different space than that which is contained in the signifier and signification of the text. The staging writes something that goes beyond what is said. It addresses itself to the spectator's body and solicits the unknowable real at work therein, just as it interpellates what was inscribed in the body in the form of unnamed, censored, and repressed experiences. Without question, this is why it is said that theater is made to be acted, or that a theatrical text only has meaning and significance when it is "put on." The staging (*mise en scene*) or embodying (*mise en corps*) of the text articulates the signifier to the letter of the body — an articulation that the actor works to "pass" along, to transmit in a writing that gives itself to be read by the spectator — and opens up a space in the body for the return of a real jouissance.

The cinematographic writing of Michael Haneke's film *The White Ribbon* provides an excellent example on this point. The film's cinematic technique itself, more so than its content, causes an effraction in the viewer and provokes real effects. It produces an anxiety and malaise so profound as to be nearly unbearable, leading film critics to call the work a "disturbing drama." Shot in black and white, the long and slow-moving film takes place against the backdrop of somber scenery, with austere and sultry interiors that the external scenes, despite their remarkably beautiful pastoral landscapes, are nevertheless unable to lighten. The turn of the century German village where the action takes place appears to be cut off from the world, as though it were plucked from a different time, thus adding to the feeling of suffocation and closure the images create. From the very beginning, the absence of any music during the credits announces the film's peculiar mood. Then the narrator's voice, which will return to punctuate the film when needed, introduces a narrative whose closure we will await in vain. The narrative purported to be at the heart of the matter is merely a pretext that turns out, in the end, to be marginal and unimportant. Although it initially clings to the narrative, the audience will be lead elsewhere, carried into a space other than the reassuring one of the narrative. In this other space, knowing the conclusion of the story will no longer be of any interest. Indeed, in the last analysis, neither the narrator's words nor the film's images address the evil that is eating away at this small and cloistered Protestant community. Instead, the real is transmitted and inscribed in the viewer's flesh by everything that is missing, unsaid, and unshown. Beyond the words and images, the precisely calculated cinematographic writing addresses itself to the viewer's unconscious, thereby opening the door to the real and producing effects of anxiety and sultriness. A number of writing techniques collude to help shatter any points of reference that the viewer could construct for him- or herself. The actors chosen to play the roles of the children resemble one another and eventually become

interchangeable, resulting in a confusion in which the audience is completely lost. But, above all, the film's most decisive events — suicide, incestuous rape, the shattering of taboos, child abuse — are never shown. Nothing is shown. At each of the film's most crucial moments, the doors are shut and the viewer is left with only voices, faint and distant murmurs, stifled tears, and cries that are just barely discernable from behind closed doors. Deprived of these sights, the viewer is confined to the work of the letter and the drive that have both been remobilized by his own proper and obscure fantasies. It is as if the writing of film's stagecraft, which is nevertheless inscribed in the field of the visible, were projecting the viewer into another space. The viewer is abandoned there to the work of the real provoked by those orphaned voices — without the possibility of any binding ties — that haunt his body. Writing and its effects, which open onto and grant access to the real, take precedence over any possible historical content. More effectively than any discourse, above and beyond the narrator's speech, these practices of the letter express the very essence of the film and create its truth-effects. The curse of the Protestant village, about which the narrator promises a story, is never addressed, explained, recounted, or interpreted. It is only transmitted in the malaise provoked in the body of the viewer.

Robert Lepage, a man of the Québécois theater who figures among the greatest contemporary directors, is one such director developing and radicalizing the link between staging and writing. For him, the play writes itself while being put on and acted out, and “the actor writes with his acting, with his body, with his mind.”¹⁹ By employing all of the means afforded by multimedia, Lepage creates genuine “theatrical writing sites.”²⁰ With such varied means — the voice, rhythm, movement, dance, the movement of bodies, images, music, light, gestures, action, and so on — the theater stages text and transmits the signifier by way of the body and the act. This passage itself is what opens up the audience, as well as the actor, to a singular experience of the real. The actor and director, for their part, must endanger themselves; they must give way to that which is capable of bursting forth from inside themselves. The creative object can only emerge and take shape out of chaos. It is in this sense that Roland Barthes' statement that writing is “a bodily practice of *jouissance*” assumes its full meaning.²¹

Theatrical writing brings about something new, unforeseen, and surprising, that — in the *après-coup* — teaches its creator something he did not know beforehand. Peter Brook, another renowned director, emphasizes that the true work of a director “consists in being there in order that something which is no longer there may come to life.”²² This writing is a frame that circumscribes a space created for the return of the real; it is a place where the subject's act can come to be, and it provides a way to reach some unseen thing that, if not for this act, would remain inaccessible. Brook further stresses that “form can be what makes it possible for the mind to enter into an event. The actor, the scenery, what we call the staging — these are forms. But if this form is not there in the service of something other than itself and in order to allow life to appear — if it is not completely flexible — then it is useless and can be the enemy of those who love the mind” (41).

In a commentary on *Happy Days*, Brook remarks upon the exacting nature of Beckett's stage directions, which are arranged "with the precision of a musical score" (41). He must have, it seems, personally rehearsed each and every detail while writing the play. "This is how choreographers work," Brook adds, "and it is fascinating to see that the dancer understands this very well — that by rigorously following the choreography, he discovers his own freedom; that in order for the form to open itself up and show the feeling contained within it, he must exactly follow each miniscule detail of the choreography" (18-19). Staging, then, is more the writing of a form than a content, a form that must be fully adhered to in order to give us access to something else. The symptom, for example, writes a form that leads the way to a certain logic. Or consider, once again, those sixteenth and seventeenth century tablatures that show where the musician must place his fingers on the instrument in order to access the music that, properly speaking, is not written down.

Artists and other creators bear witness to this experience, in which the utmost precision and repetition of the gesture or movement requires a degree of concentration that carries them into another space. There, cut off from reality, they gain access to an elsewhere within themselves from which an act, a creative object, will emerge. The constraint that this precision imposes on the body deprives the ego of its means of acting, handcuffing it so that only the mind — and therefore the subject — is able to spring forth from this compulsory silence. Once again, Brook touches upon something of this sort in an experiment he conducted along with the Japanese actor and director Yoshi Oida. They wanted to see whether it was possible, through such banal actions as looking at and drinking a glass of water, "to render an action of this order so transparent that we might see the poetry in it, as in certain of the simple little phrases written by poets. It was a search for the complete removal of the means employed by the actor while knowing full well that without a tremendous amount of precision, owing to those very same means, it would be impossible to reach what we were truly seeking" (55).

In the same spirit, Lepage isolates how the Japanese, "in a single line, give expression to the entirety of life. They pick up a brush, spend a whole day in concentration, and then at a given moment they draw a line and everything is there"; and, he adds, "I love to do that, and I hope that my work — my theater, my shows — reflects it from time to time. Sometimes it ends up being just a nameless scribble; but every once in a while, there is scene in a show which is exactly like a very simple brushstroke, without artifice or too much flair, and it contains all of the essentials."²³

The act supported by the phallus is akin to the line in calligraphy. While bearing the living mark of the real of the subject who draws it, it does not occur — as the *passage à l'acte* does — in the form of an escape that exempts the subject from his complete and full responsibility. But the act here, supported by the phallus, is not without a subject, even if that subject emerges from elsewhere. The subject summons the conditions necessary for this act to take place; he awaits it, recognizes it, claims responsibility for it, and signs the truth it brings forth.

THE ACT: WRITING A SPACE FOR THE REAL

The calligrapher must spend years in practice, copying the great masters and, as Hassan Massoudy says, assimilating “all aspects of culture that relate to [his art]”: “Practice awakens the knowledge gradually stored up within the body and releases the expression of myriad nuances.”²⁴ He goes on to explain that calligraphic “codes serve to control the internal excitement of the calligrapher and to prevent his feelings from overflowing [...]. But the calligrapher must pass beyond these set rules. To achieve his aim, he must first conform to these restrictions, and then go beyond them. This is because a true calligraphic composition must contain something indefinable, something elusive and powerful that takes it beyond all rules.”²⁵

During his cure, an analysand who we will call Mr. T. testified about what he discovered by practicing calligraphy: “The creation happens independent of me. There are magical works, which are out of my control. Aesthetics are not the most important thing in calligraphy; it is the state in which you do it. You try to immerse yourself in the body movements.” His master once told him that “your pen will become the perfect extension of your unconscious, you are going to find your own symbolic, the one residing within you.” As Mr. T. continued, “I try to situate myself between acting and not acting. There is a space between the two, and you could say that that is where the unconscious can express itself.” When applying this technique in his own original works, he mentioned that he experiences the eruption of “creative moments which are independent of my will.” In one session, he brought a simple dream: “I was doing some calligraphy, and I signed it with my seal.” This dream came at a key moment in his analysis. Mr. T. was going through the simultaneously difficult and liberating traversal of the psychotic experience. His delusion not only fell, having failed and become useless to him, but the object at the heart of his mission in the psychotic enterprise also collapsed, leading him to question everything that had hitherto constituted the foundations and meaning of his life. Freed from the constraints in which his psychotic beliefs had shackled him, but also deeply shaken, he was confronted with the obligation to reconstruct his life on new foundations, to renegotiate his relations with others and the world, and to redefine his objectives as well as the values upon which to base his actions and new ethics. The dream, in a way, signs the responsibility that the subject must henceforth take for the real at work within him. Even though it is outside of his control, this real can no longer be attributed to an evil source that was his mission to eradicate: “No matter what I place my seal on, it still does not come from me. That is what I still have a hard time integrating — the fact that I could be the creator of something which is outside of my intention and my control, freeing myself from the idea that I am an instrument of God and that I have a mission. The important thing is not knowing where it comes from, but what I do with it.”

Completely abandoning a practice of painting that clung to the visual representation of the objects populating his delusional universe, calligraphy opened up another space for Mr. T. — that of the body, the letter, and the act. Calligraphy, furthermore, carried him beyond the hold of the signifier and the interpretation in which he had been trapped. Out of the act and the gesture, something unanticipated

emerged. It is as if the impassioned discovery of calligraphy were concretizing, in a practice of the letter, the liberating experience of the energy of the drive, which is henceforth unbound from the constraints imposed by the exigency and idea of a perfection anchored to his messianic destiny: “You could say that my life is a calligraphic line. You have one chance, you say something, you do something, but you can’t turn back the clock. No alteration is possible. And if you mess up, well, you start again. Before, I used to have a ferocious judge in my head, who condemned me for even the slightest error.” Mr. T. is fascinated by the Zen line, which is different from the Chinese one that is its perfection. The Zen line is rough, textured, alive, and in it “you can see that the human hand has passed through the line [...]. It is a line that doesn’t aspire to aesthetics, but to vivacity. There is something very moving in its clumsiness.” What moves him here is precisely what he used to abhor: the very same real that used to harbor something evil, which he had to abolish both within himself and in humanity. In moments of anxiety, the practice of his art calms this feeling. Calligraphy, through the practice of the gesture and the concentration it requires, draws the contours and place of the thing that takes shape in the vivacity and truth of the line, which expresses what cannot be said. It is as if the concentrated gesture or the act that reproduces a line were able to unlink the drive from its binding to any sort of ideas, ideals, representations, or fantasies in order to bring it to bear upon the creation of other things.

“I don’t depict, I pictorialize. I don’t represent, I present.”²⁶ This statement by Pierre Soulages, the famed painter of black, perfectly illustrates the radical experience he pursues in painting or, rather, in the act of painting. For him, painting is “above all a poetic experience. It is a metaphor; it doesn’t allow itself to be explained, it doesn’t even let itself be broached by explanation” (34). Soulages paints in black. There is no more content, no more shape, sometimes even no more form; there is only black and hints of light. There is nothing left for an interpretation to grab hold of, not even a title — which Soulages refuses to give to his paintings. There is no signifier to serve as a guide or even as a diversion, which would still be a way of offering a foothold to the viewer. Instead, he signs his paintings by indicating the type of material used — paint, walnut stain, lithograph — and the date he ended his work. Having no wish to reproduce an object, or express a feeling, or give shape to a thought or mood, Soulages does not depict. His painting is like a writing whose function is not to write what is said. “What I do, what I make, teaches me what I am looking for,” he clarifies; indeed, it is as if the only thing that matters is the experience that produces for both the painter and the viewer (34). The act of painting, much like the act of calligraphy, becomes the exercise and the discipline to which the being gives itself over in order to have access to another place. In so doing, it endows this other place with a visibility that concedes nothing to the imaginary that, for its part, remains powerless and unable to recuperate anything. It is in this sense that Soulages’ work takes us straight to the heart of the question of the subject’s act, insofar as it solicits the letter of the body in a practice of writing that creates a space for the real and the expression of what the signifier is unable to represent. Just like the mathematician or the poet, his painting is a practice of writing. It does not seek to reproduce but, rather, it is a quest for the elusive thing it attempts to approach. His paintings delimit the borders of that space out of which the real emerges as something indefinable, something that the work transmits not in what it says but in the experience it provokes.

Soulages does not paint black itself but rather the light reflected by black. He is the painter of the *Beyondblack* (*l'Outrenoir*), a term he created to designate that other space to which he attempts to gain access through painting. He recounts the experience of his discovery one night in 1979, when he spent hours working furiously, without success, on a painting that he had long since made a mess of:

I told myself that if I was continuing to work on it like this, it's because there was something more powerful inside of me, pushing me to continue. But I was exhausted and I went to bed. When I woke up, I realized that what I was doing was new for me, that it was another type of painting: it wasn't the black itself that mattered, but the light reflected by the black, the light coming from the color that is the greatest absence of light — most of all, it wasn't an optical phenomenon but something very profound, going deep within me [...]. It was an inner experience, simultaneously intellectual and spiritual, though none of these adjectives are entirely suitable. This new gaze, this way of seeing black that attained a mental field other than that of simply black, is what I came to call *Beyondblack*. In this sense, as with "*outré-Rhin*" [Germany, beyond the Rhine] and "*outré-Manche*" [Britain, beyond the English Channel], it names another country. (12)

How better to express an act that "moves towards what it doesn't understand" and that, by chance, opens onto the real by making something new emerge there, something true and unexpected? Soulages, to this end, cites the poetry of St. John of the Cross: "Not for all the beauty / will I ever be lost, / but for I-know-not-what / that by fortune I may reach."²⁷

These lines effectively illustrate the primacy of the stress that is placed on the emergence of the real, where the subject discovers himself to be forever beyond order, rules, the law, and norms. This real is the not-so-clumsy thing that signs the subject's presence in the Zen line of calligraphy, as Mr. T. explains. Peter Brook, in his own way, defines it as a choice that imposes itself on the director: the choice to either "accept a rather aesthetic taste — which is to say a love for everything artificial, because you are touched by it find it very beautiful — or to refuse all of this by telling yourself that you have but one goal, one need: to be in the service, with every available means, of the appearance of a moment of life."²⁸

It is not by chance that the question of the artist's act — which takes the letter of the body as its instrument and opens onto the real — should lead us to the mystic, to the one who holds himself there in an essential relation to the real and to what escapes perception, understanding, representation, and any possible seizure. Whether it is in the quest for a place in which to lose himself, or in the radical and intransigent search for the always elusive object of desire, the mystic immerses himself in the experience, as in a journey that involves his entire being and his entire body. And insofar as he is oriented toward this unattainable "I-know-not-what that by fortune I may reach," toward a nonnegotiable jouissance that places him out of bounds, lost to the collective as to the institution, the mystic is not without resonance with the subject of the unconscious, which is precisely the concern of psychoanalysis. On this crucial

point, Apollon reminds us that what constitutes “the object of an experience that corresponds to [the subject of the unconscious’s] most intimate exigencies, and that makes him ultimately untreatable, is a real that causes the desire that speech can evoke at specific moments.”²⁹ Indeed, the phrase “a real that causes the desire that speech can evoke at specific moments,” which applies just as well to the artist and his quest, brings us back to the analytic experience and to the very stakes entailed therein, namely that the real — the *jouissance* that was borne in advance and outside of the scene by the self-enclosed writings of the symptom or the *passage à l’acte* — should be taken into account by the subject as the place holding his most intimate truth. Psychoanalysis is an ethical practice, a practice of full speech and “the signifier that erodes and hollows out [the symbolic] order by evoking the work of *jouissance* within the being.”³⁰ Therefore, the speech that is supported by and sustains the phallus — the signifier of a nonnegotiable desire to which speech gives way/voice [*voie(x)*] in the social space — is an act. It is an act derived from the drive of desire unbound from ideals and norms, an act that the subject continues to support and sign.

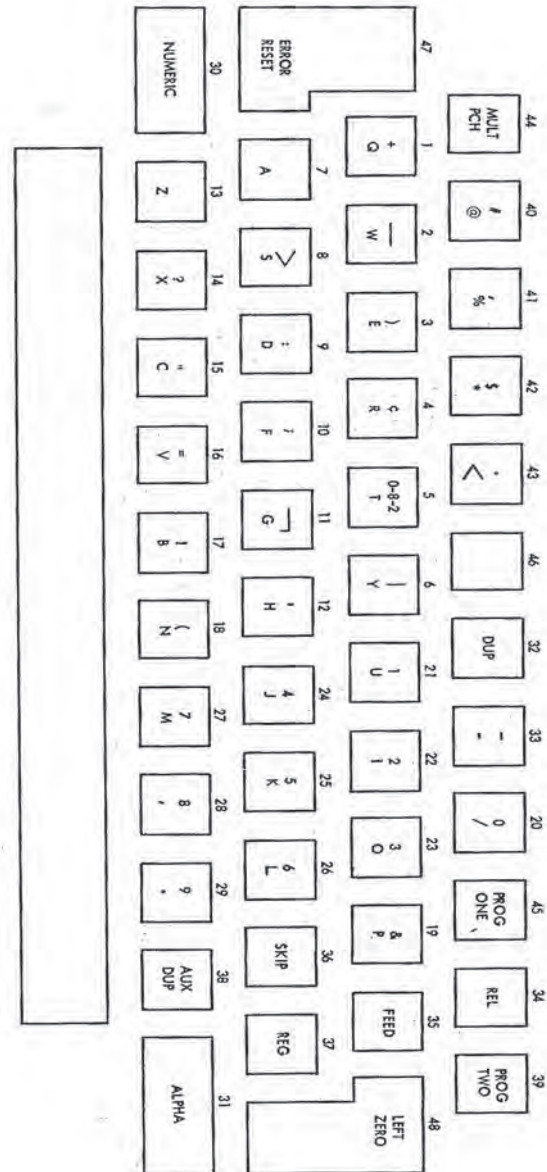
Translated by Michael Stanish

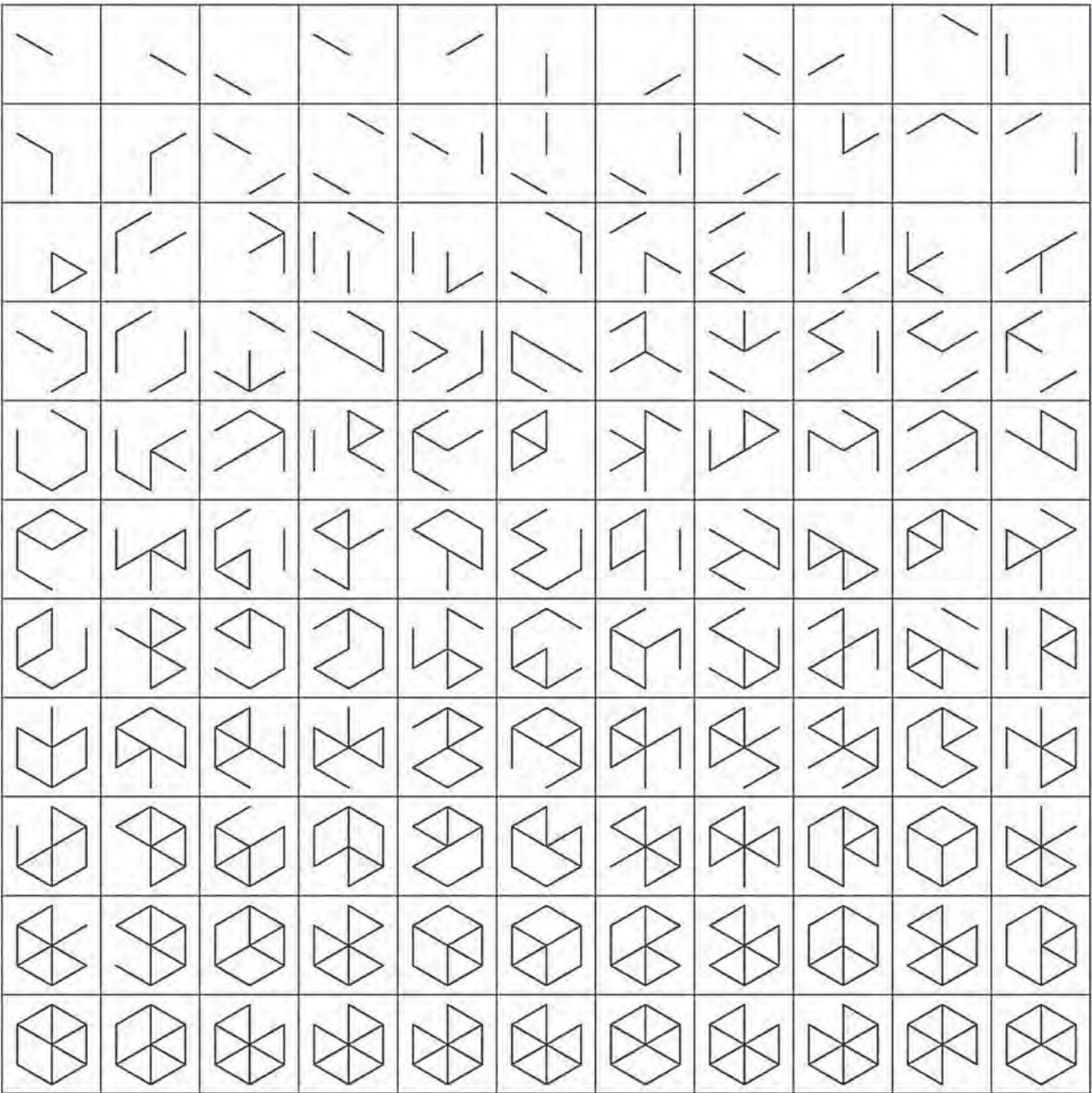


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4. Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XVIII: D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant, 1970-1971*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2006), 59.
5. Bernard d'Espagnat, "A la recherche du réel, Entretien avec Bernard d'Espagnat," *Jean Staune*, interview by Jean Staune, April 18, 2005, accessed November 15 2009, <http://www.staune.fr/A-la-recherche-du-reel-Entretien.html>.
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8. Nicolas Hannoncourt, "Writing Music," in *Writing*, 152-57.
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12. Ibid., 102.
13. John Chadwick qtd. in Jean, *Writing*, 125-26.
14. Sigmund Freud, *From the History of an Infantile Neurosis*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (hereafter S.E.), ed. and trans. James Strachey et al. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), 17:26. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically within the text.
15. Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre X: L'angoisse, 1962-1963* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2004), 148.
16. See Freud, *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, in S.E. 7:1-122.
17. See Freud, "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman," in S.E. 18:145-72.
18. Lacan, *L'angoisse*, 145. Subsequent consecutive references will appear parenthetically within the text.
19. Robert Lepage, "Il faut que l'acteur ait une soif de savoir," interview by Josette Féral, in *Mise en scène et jeu de l'acteur, Entretiens, tome 2: Le corps en scène* (Montreal: Éditions Jeu, 2001), 168.
20. Ibid.
21. Roland Barthes, "Préface à la civilisation de l'écriture de Roger Druet et Herman Grégoire," in *Œuvres complètes, 1974-1980*, ed. Éric Marty (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1993), 3:122.
22. Peter Brook, *Climat de Confiance* (Québec: Les éditions de L'instant même, 2007), 16.

Subsequent consecutive references will appear parenthetically within the text.

23. Lepage, "Il faut que l'acteur ait une soif de savoir," in *Mise en scène et jeu de l'acteur, Entretiens, tome 2*, 179.
24. Hassan Massoudy, "Calligraphy," in *Writing*, 170.
25. *Ibid.*, 173.
26. Pierre Soulages, *Rétrospective au Centre Pompidou, Entretien avec l'artiste* (Dijon: Éditions Faton, 2009), 34. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically within the text.
27. St. John of the Cross, *St. John of the Cross: Alchemist of the Soul*, ed. and trans. Antonio T. De Nicolás (York Beach: Samuel Weiser, 1996), 147.
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ENABLING CONSTRAINTS: TOWARD AN AESTHETICS OF SYMBOLIC LIFE

tracy mcnuilty

In a landmark Lacanian study of Adolf Eichmann, the architect of Hitler's Final Solution, Juliet Flower MacCannell locates in the genocidal program of the Third Reich the insistence of a "will-to-jouissance" enabled by the failure of traditional symbolic laws. As she writes,

What is new in Lacan's reading of Law and the Drives is his perception that the symbolic tactics civilization employs to open and close its self-inflicted wounds (the wounds that make us human) are no longer compelling fictions. More "balanced" modes of symbolic temporizing have taken a back seat. A direct, "imbalanced" relation to "Drive" displaces them. Under Holocaust, nuclear and global catastrophic threats, the will-to-jouissance insists with immediate virulence.¹

Increasingly, she argues, modern civilization confronts the danger — but also the temptation — of a "jouissance not restricted by the word, by the ethical framing of excess and lack" (67). As so-called "symbolic" or paternal laws fade from the

picture, fantasy fills the void by proposing objects to organize or structure the drive in their place. Fantasy grounds our contemporary culture by “invert[ing] the logical (symbolic) structuring of necessary lack in us as the Other’s *bliss*, or *fulfillment*” (67). In Eichmann’s grudging surrender to Hitler’s genocidal imperative — the descent into what he describes as a “death whirl” — MacCannell sees an abdication of his own desire as a subject (founded on lack) in an attempt to appease the unspoken will of the Führer.²

But MacCannell’s essay also offers an innovative analysis of the psychoanalytic stakes of writing. As she observes of Eichmann, “He always acted in accordance with the rules, but more than that, and more than simply following orders, he felt compelled to ‘go beyond’ the written law, the norms of constraint, beyond the limit. He was the instrument of a will-to-jouissance not necessarily his own” (72). In opposing *rule* and *constraint*, MacCannell draws an implicit distinction between law in its imaginary function as a representation of a law-making authority and the properly symbolic dimension of written law as a limit or constraint. Eichmann attempts to bypass this symbolic dimension, identifying his own will with the law’s source. In this quest, he claims to be guided by Immanuel Kant’s categorical imperative, to act in such a way “that the maxim of your will could always hold at the same time as a principle of universal legislation.”³ But as Hannah Arendt observes, in her celebrated account of his Jerusalem trial,

In this household use, all that is left of Kant’s spirit is the demand that a man do more than obey the law, that he go beyond the mere call of obedience and *identify his own will with the principle behind the law — the source from which the law sprang*. In Kant’s philosophy that source was practical reason; in Eichmann’s household use of him, it was the will of the Führer.⁴

In Arendt’s words, Eichmann’s perverted moral maxim is to “act in such a way that the Führer, if he knew of your action, might approve it.”⁵ As the principle “behind” the law, the Führer’s will is further remarkable in never being expressed in speech, in specific orders or written directives. Even as he affirms that “the words of the Führer have the force of law,”⁶ Eichmann finds that he is unable to recall any specific words that the Führer spoke in his presence. Instead, the Führer’s will takes the form of an internalized “voice of conscience,” underscoring what MacCannell describes as the “unbearable relation of voice to Superegoic Law.”⁷

She understands Eichmann’s position as “a response [...] to the jouissance of the Other as voice, rather than to the Other as *speech*” (69). For Lacan, speech is defined classically as the field of the symbolic pact, “the social contract that divides us from each other as mutual aggressors” (69). But “*Voice* is already object *a*; the embodiment or bearer of a ‘principle behind the law.’ It took shape in Lacan’s discourse as one of the four fundamental objects [...] around which the fantasy structuring drive circulates” (70). Whereas speech, as the field of the signifier, works to limit the insistence of jouissance by erecting barriers against it, the voice as object *a* is the bearer of the deadly jouissance that insists within

the fantasy — whence Lacan’s description of the voice as an “object fallen from the organ of speech,” the material support of the superego that takes shape in demand.⁸ MacCannell sees Eichmann as a subject who has decided to forego the protections offered by the symbolic, “identify[ing] himself with the object a in its role as agent of the [Other’s] Jouissance” by identifying his own “voice of conscience” with the “will” materialized in the Führer’s voice above and beyond the specific orders and directives he issues.⁹

In opposing Eichmann’s different attitudes toward the rule of *law* (identified with the authority of the voice) and the written law in its function as *constraint*, MacCannell suggests that the symbolic dimension of speech may be essentially related to the function of writing. In the Third Reich, the *ethos* of surrendering to Hitler’s will goes hand in hand with a refusal of *written* laws and, more broadly, the structural function of writing as a limit or barrier to the superego. The authority of the voice is not transmitted in writing and, more importantly, it is not restricted by the written word. Eichmann speaks at length of the distrust of written orders among the Nazi elite and the corresponding valuation of the voice and spoken commands as more fully expressing the “spirit” of the law — a spirit that is inseparable from the authority of the Führer himself. The problem MacCannell identifies, however, extends well beyond fascist Germany. She notes that in our own contemporary society, as in Hitler’s Germany, there is no formal law against genocide.¹⁰ Following Arendt, MacCannell calls for a written law that would specifically prohibit genocide and could be adjudicated in an international court. In calling for a *written* law, and not simply a moral imperative or a societal consensus, MacCannell implies that the symbolic dimension of law may bear a privileged relation to written constraints and, in particular, to the negative form of the prohibition that emphasizes its status as a limit or barrier more than as the representation of an authority. A written law is a law that requires us to struggle with it, whose *letter* functions as a material constraint to its general spirit.

This paper is part of a project that attempts to rethink the function and importance of the written law — and of writing more broadly — in the context of political theory. The foregoing of written constraints in favor of an authority that is presented as antinomial to writing is an increasingly common phenomenon today, whose clearest expression is the resurgent political theology of decision that is a pervasive feature not only of modern politics, but also of contemporary political theory and philosophy. Legal theorist Pierre Legendre observes that in the Romano-Canonical understanding of the emperor or the pope as the “living voice of the law [*viva vox iuris*]” or the “Law that breathes [*Lex animata*],”¹¹ a mystically alienated human body — or what Legendre calls the “living writing” — is made to “stand in the place of the absolute book.”¹² The result is a “banalization of writing,” in which the text is conceived merely as the bearer of a message.¹³

From Paul to Schmitt and to Badiou, the discourse of the decisive act is invariably structured as a polemic against writing, promoting a reductive understanding of the written law as nothing more than a dead letter or rote norm with respect to which the unscripted act, dictatorial decision, or explosive event represents the only possibility for a dynamic transformation of the situation. The appeal of this turn away from writing is easy to understand. After all, the written law is the guardian of a normative order, the

codification of an existing state of affairs, and it is thus inherently resistant to profound change — and, in particular, to those “subjectivizing events” that Badiou celebrates. But is it only that? In Legendre’s words, the banalization of writing in favor of the decisive act is “founded on an equivocation according to which the real and the symbolic would be one and the same category.”¹⁴

In this paper I propose to explore these questions by examining the relationship between writing and the symbolic, which illuminates a dimension of the written law that is often overlooked: its function as *constraint*, which is irreducible — and in some cases even antinomial — to its function as rule or the representation of an authority.

My objective here is not to make a claim for some kind of return to traditional symbolic laws (which are clearly on the wane one way or the other and not worth resurrecting in some nostalgic or reactionary mode), but to reflect on the relationship between the symbolic, in its most elementary or structural form, and the function of writing. My hypothesis is that writing as constraint may express the essence of the symbolic as Lacan conceives it, which is obscured when the symbolic is reduced to the function of rules and laws — especially the paternal laws and prohibitions with which it is so often identified. Our tendency to conflate these two conceptions — and, therefore, to dismiss as irrelevant or outdated the first along with the second — means that we risk not only misunderstanding the function and necessity of the symbolic, where the subject of desire is concerned, but also collapsing it into the purely imaginary function of rules and norms as the representations of societal ideals.

Lacan offers an important minimal definition of the symbolic when he muses that the written commandments of the Mosaic law may be nothing other than “the very laws of speech.”¹⁵ This is because the condition of speech is that there be “distance between the subject and *das Ding*,”¹⁶ the deadly jouissance that insists within the fantasy and that represents the ultimate “fulfillment” of the subject, its annihilation or absorption by the superegoic Other. In distancing the Thing, it opens up a space where the subject can live. As the “laws of speech,” the commandments are not merely the laws of lack, of the object’s impossibility, or of the loss of jouissance. The symbolic is something other than the primordial subjection to the signifier that Lacan calls castration, which occasions a loss of natural jouissance and a perversion of the natural aims of the organism. This is an unavoidable experience for every speaking being, whether or not she finds symbolic laws credible or well-founded. The symbolic is a creative support for the subject of desire.

The “laws of speech” to which Lacan refers are the laws at work in the unconscious itself, which elucidate a dimension of the symbolic that is not reducible to the function of law as it is traditionally understood. Freud’s work with hysterics makes clear that even in a world in which traditional paternal laws really are compelling fictions, at least for many, a given subject always encounters the symbolic in a way that is irreducibly specific and that may or may not find an analogy or echo in the paternal law that forbids

access to the object that would satisfy desire. In other words, the fact that a society accepts a given set of laws as compelling fictions does not mean that the individual subject is any less obliged to come up with a way of managing lack and excess in its own body or psychic economy. This is the fundamental problem Freud encounters in his writings on femininity: How does a woman assume castration, if not by confronting the incest prohibition and passing through the Oedipus complex? She is not the object of the societal norms and prohibitions that model the relation to lack for the masculine subject, and yet she is confronted all the same with the inevitability of castration and with the necessity of passing through the field of language in order to evoke and manage the effects of the drive on her body.

The answer is to be found not in the sphere of social norms and obligations but in the practice of psychoanalysis itself. With the invention of the transference, Freud solicits the unconscious to construct a knowledge about the subject's encounter with a real, which allows for a treatment of the drive and its effects on the organism, as well as the possibility of a creative channeling of drive energy toward new ends. At stake is a passage through the field of the Other that, in reactivating the originary encounter with castration and allowing it to be constructed, also opens up a space for the subject of desire. This passage in turn sheds light on the function of more traditional symbolic forms — including societal norms and prohibitions — which, under certain conditions, function not merely as representations of castration but as structures that allow it to be tolerated, affirmed, and in some cases even to become the basis for creative work (as with those sublimations constitutive of culture itself).

In what follows I examine the specific function of written constraints in sustaining what I propose to call the “experimental” dimension of the symbolic — both within “traditional” laws and in other, very different, contexts. My focus is on those articulations of the symbolic that take a creative form or enable a creative practice and that therefore provide a structure in which the subject can renew or reactivate its encounter with the lack in the Other — or castration — in a way that sustains desire and allows the subject to exercise its freedom.

MOSES AND MONOTHEISM, OR THE ADVENT OF THE WRITTEN LAW

I will begin with Freud's last major work, *Moses and Monotheism*. At face value, there is nothing particularly “experimental” about this example, since the Mosaic law may be the ultimate example of the normative symbolic. For Freud, however, it really represents the emergence of this experimental dimension, insofar as it constitutes a break with a normative order of rules and prohibitions that is not at all symbolic, namely the totemic structure and the group psychology that results from it.

The importance of the distinction between “rule” and “constraint” is arguably the upshot of Freud's argument in *Moses and Monotheism*, which allows us to distinguish between two fundamentally

different registers of law: *imaginary authority* and *symbolic constraint*. *Moses and Monotheism* could be read as bringing full circle an investigation of the symbolic as constraint that begins in earnest with *The Interpretation of Dreams*, thereby emphasizing the continuum between the function of the signifier in the dreamwork under transference and the written commandments of the Mosaic Decalogue, both of which are opposed to what Lacan identifies as the imaginary dimension of law — the internalization of the law of the primal father as superego. Each of these investigations elucidates, in a different way, the stakes of the symbolic as the “laws of speech.” If I restrict my attention to *Moses and Monotheism*, it is because it deals with the origin (or at least *an* origin) of the symbolic as such in the foundation of a fundamentally new kind of law that attempts to break altogether with the function of the imaginary. It links the origin of the symbolic to the emergence of writing.

In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud advances, for the first time, the thesis that all forms of social and religious life can be understood as responses to the primeval murder of the father and the totemic belief structures that result from it. This totemic logic could be defined most simply as the postulation of a source or ground of authority, in the form of an exceptional figure who incarnates the law: the father of the primal horde, the animal substitutes that are worshipped and feared in his place, and finally the omnipotent father-God of monotheism. It gives rise to an imaginary understanding of law that dominates all subsequent iterations of the social order. And yet, while the laws of the fraternal pact were supposed to displace the exceptional authority of the hated father, this exceptional figure actually persists as a powerful psychic imago in and through the very laws that purport to displace his exceptional authority. The first “laws” of the fraternal pact are really just the internalization and codification of what the sons take to be the father’s will, notably the ban on any other male taking possession of the women of the horde, in which Freud sees the origin of the incest prohibition.

Almost thirty years later, Freud returns to the totemic thesis in *Moses and Monotheism*, but this time he does so with an eye toward isolating the specificity of the Mosaic moment with respect to this larger development. Previously, the monotheist religions were considered only through the lens of Christianity and, specifically, such Catholic traditions and rituals as the Eucharistic feast. But Freud now considers Mosaic monotheism — particularly the ten commandments of the Hebrew Decalogue that encode its fundamental tenets — not merely as a continuation of the totemic trajectory but as the first true break with this logic. In essence, his thesis is that the Mosaic religion introduces a fundamental absence or lack there where the totemic structure places the all-powerful father that functions as the ideal ego for each member of the fraternal pact. It is therefore not a matter of one normative order replacing another but of the institution of an experimental symbolic that requires each subject to pass through the lacking locus of the Other, rather than rely upon identification with, or submission to, an imaginary authority.

In Freud's reconstruction of the Exodus story, Moses the Egyptian introduces the uncultured Hebrew tribes to the rigorous monotheism he learned in the court of the Pharaoh Akhenaton. Freud argues that the Jews' lingering guilt over the repressed primal murder is the source of their initial enthusiasm for the new religion, which exalted the primeval father as the source of all life and, as such, satisfied their craving for a powerful ideal ego. However, the great Moses is not satisfied with a mere father cult but sets forth a rigorous ethical doctrine that attempted to "leave a permanent imprint upon their character" by encouraging them to abandon their magical practices and to make great "advances in intellectuality and [...] sublimations."¹⁷ Among its numerous innovations with respect to earlier forms of law and religious observance, Freud stresses two in particular: the repudiation of sacrifice¹⁸ and the ban on incarnate manifestations of the deity. Both innovations have the effect of evacuating the place of the all-powerful father and, in particular, the superegoic character of his law, which is really nothing more than the rule of his exclusive right to jouissance. The first innovation marks a shift away from ritual practices intended to satisfy or appease the deity's demands, while the second can be read as a break with the totemic foundations of sovereignty or the belief in a law spiritually incarnated in a living body.

Moses is a leader who evacuates the place of the leader, who undercuts the logic of identification that binds the group, and who refounds the collective undertaking on a non-imaginary basis. In Lacan's terms, one could say that the key innovation of the Mosaic tradition is the invention of the symbolic as distinct either from the real (the exceptional jouissance of the primal father) or the imaginary (the father imago that persists not only as an ideal ego, even after his murder, but also as the norms and prohibitions that take the father's place in the logic of the fraternal pact). *Moses and Monotheism* is really an attempt to extract this symbolic dimension from what would otherwise be a dialectic of real and imaginary: real father and father imago, real murder and ritualized Eucharistic feast, and so forth. The second and third commandments of the Hebrew Decalogue, which forbid representations of the deity or the speaking of his name, underscore this decompletion of the symbolic — they are the emptying out of the logical place of the Other, which manifests itself as a rupture or breach in the field of representation and as a hole in language.

In early Jewish ritual practice this negative space is given a form in the Holy of Holies, the innermost sanctum of the Israelite tabernacle. It is associated with the deity, not as the site of his manifestation or presence, but as a space that must not be entered on pain of death, a "holy hole." In identifying God with a space that cannot be breached or transgressed, the Mosaic law does not simply establish the parameters of religious observance; it also articulates something fundamental about the symbolic function of the law that, in institutionalizing this distance, opens up a space in which the subject of desire can come into being. This is why Lacan says of the ten commandments that "whether or not we obey them, we still cannot help hearing them — in their indestructible character they prove to be the *very laws of speech*."¹⁹ The precondition of speech is that the signifier be there, limiting the real and opening up a space in which subjectivity becomes possible. Nowhere is this logic better expressed than in the fourth commandment,

the commandment to honor the Sabbath day. According to Lacan, “that suspension, that emptiness, clearly introduces into human life the sign of a gap, a beyond relative to every law of utility.”²⁰ The Sabbath memorializes or sanctifies God’s creation of the world, which paradoxically concludes with the insertion of a gap. In a gloss of Lacan’s reading, Julia Lupton and Kenneth Reinhard write that

God completes the world by subtracting something from it, namely his own activity. [...] The sublime emptiness of the seventh day marks the close of the process of creation *ex nihilo* that began with God’s first utterance, an act, the Kabbalah argues, that required God to diminish himself, to decomplete his own fullness in order to make room for the world.²¹

God withdraws to create a place where “something is missing,” namely his own full presence. In this way, the commandment links the emergence of the human subject to the negation of the fullness of the real, the unmediated presence of *das Ding*: “the subject of religion [...] only emerges in the decompletion of the symbolic universe, through the positive addition to the cosmos of an instance of negation, of suspended activity. In this moment of ar-rest, the subject comes forward as the bearer of the lack that has engendered him.”²²

As the “laws of speech,” the commandments mark a break not only with every previous understanding of law, but also with the “law of the spirit” that will come to displace the Mosaic law in Paul’s gospel of salvation. They are understood not as mere representations or placeholders of a force or authority figured as “beyond” the law, but as the articulation of a symbolic structure whose spacing or negation of the real undercuts the fantasy of a possible embodiment or incarnation of the law, which is implicit in Paul’s gospel of salvation.

I believe that this symbolic dimension of law is fundamentally linked to the formal and structural innovation implied in the advent of written law. Admittedly, this problematic is not taken up in any detail by Freud. But, while his argument places no particular stress on the question of writing, he does pause to consider the hypothesis of one scholar that “the Israelites of that earliest period — that is to say, the scribes of Moses — may have had some share in the invention of the first alphabet.”²³ While Freud initially presents their mastery of a written alphabet as further evidence that Moses and his immediate cohort were Egyptians, he also muses that “if they were subject to the prohibition against pictures they would even have had a motive for abandoning the hieroglyphic picture-writing while adapting its written characters to expressing a new language” (43). For Freud, the ban on the images is thus not merely the object of a written law; it is also linked to a fundamental shift in the Israelites’ attitude toward writing: a movement away from the imaginary function of representation and toward the symbolic function of spacing or negation. The broader stakes of writing for the Mosaic law, however, are implicit in Freud’s discussion of the ethical code of Moses and, above all, the subsequent rejection and overturning of this innovation by Pauline Christianity.

With respect to the Mosaic law, Freud suggests that Pauline Christianity represents a return to the totemic logic in all its ambivalence. In Paul's gospel, the father now takes second place to the son, who stands in his stead, just as the sons of the primal horde had longed to do. But while the *apparent* result of this destruction is the liberation of the sons from the old totemic logic that held them captive, Freud argues that the reverse is actually true: It is the old logic that triumphs once and for all. Even as Pauline Christianity dispenses with the law that took the father's place in the Jewish religion, it cannot dispense with the supposition of an all-powerful and all-knowing Other. The proof of this is that the Christian innovation culminates in the "return of a single father-god of unlimited dominion" (84).

Ultimately, the sons' victory is therefore not a victory *over* the logic of totemism but a victory *of* this logic in its fundamental ambivalence. Freud concludes that the deity's unlimited power is his most crucial feature, and he argues that the success of Christianity must be attributed to the enduring memory of the all-powerful primal father: it is "the religion of their primal father to which were attached their hope of reward, of distinction and finally of world-dominion" (85). In other words, it is here that the omnipotent God of unlimited power emerges for the first time. If the function of the Mosaic law was to negate or exclude the exception, the effect of Paul's innovation will be to *negate that negation*, to *exclude the exclusion*, such that the fantasy of the exception reasserts itself once again in a particularly powerful form as the gospel of salvation. This resurrected exceptionalism expresses itself as the reign of "spirit," whose authority is directly opposed to the function of writing. In Paul's words, "we no longer serve under the old written law, but under the new law of the spirit."²⁴

Freud's conclusion is that "Paul, who carried Judaism on, also destroyed it."²⁵ What is destroyed is not the compulsive character of the law that serves as the explicit object of Paul's polemic;²⁶ rather, it is the symbolic function of the Mosaic law that empties out the locus of the Other.²⁷ In thus targeting its written character, Paul's polemic against the Jewish law reveals something crucial about the *symbolic function* of writing in the Mosaic law. Tellingly, the "spiritual law" that comes to replace it finds expression in the authority of the voice, which has a distinctly superegoic character. In Alain Badiou's suggestive formulation, the result of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus is that he turns away from "any authority other than that of the Voice that personally called him to be a subject."²⁸ The spiritual authority of the voice — a voice whose insistence is radically disjoined from speech, never finding expression in any specific directives or ethical program — comes to substitute for the written law in its function as a limit or constraint.

WRITING AS "NEGATIVE EXHIBITION OF THE INFINITE" IN KANT'S AESTHETICS

In a celebrated passage from *Critique of Judgment*, Immanuel Kant appeals to the Decalogue to illustrate the indispensable role of the written law in resisting the lure of the imaginary and the blind submission

to power that it encourages. He elaborates a problematic that is only implicit in Freud's argument: the function of the commandments' *writtenness* as distinct from whatever content they might communicate. Kant stresses that the function of the written law as constraint is, above all, an *aesthetic* function, inasmuch as it makes possible a purely "negative exhibition of the infinite" in which there is no sensible support for the imagination.

The passage appears in a surprising context: in the final pages of the last section of the Analytic of the Sublime, which are dedicated to the dynamically sublime contemplation of nature as a might. Nature, judged as dynamically sublime, arouses fear.²⁹ When we are confronted with manifestations of natural might, we know that we are no match for them; indeed, it is a given that our mere life is nothing in comparison to the awesome power of an erupting volcano, an avalanche, or a tidal wave. Kant specifies that it is impossible to find something sublime if we are truly afraid of it, if we are simply seized by terror.³⁰ Nevertheless, fearful manifestations of natural might may be judged sublime despite their capacity to overwhelm us.³¹ This is because they raise the soul's fortitude and allow us to discover in ourselves an *ability to resist*, which gives us the courage to believe that we could be a match for nature's seeming omnipotence. Even as nature confronts us with our own limitations, we find in our power of reason a standard that includes infinity itself as a unit; in contrast to this standard, everything in nature is small. We thus discover in our mind a force superior to nature in its immensity, which is the basis of a self-preservation that is different from the one endangered by the nature outside of us. Reason calls forth a strength that makes our merely natural concerns (property, health, and even life itself) appear small. It prevents our *humanity* from being degraded, even though a *human being* must inevitably succumb to the dominance of nature. While a man's life may be powerless against natural might, reason affirms that the life of man is not to be located in his physical existence but in the exercise of a capacity for transcendence that raises him above his own limitations as well as those of nature itself.

Kant then considers the power of the almighty God as a special case of natural might. He admits that it would be foolish and even sacrilegious to imagine our mind to be superior to the effects produced by such a might, since the dominant feeling incited by God's might is not the sublimity of our own nature, but rather submission, prostration, and impotence. Nonetheless, he argues that a righteous person may *fear* God without being *afraid* of him. The effects of might can arouse in us the idea of God's *sublimity* if we are able to recognize in our own attitude a sublimity commensurate to God, which elevates us above fear of God's wrath.

The analytic concludes with a discussion of the second commandment of the Hebrew Decalogue. Kant describes it as the "most sublime passage in the Jewish law," because it facilitates a purely "negative exhibition of the infinite" in which there is no sensible support for the imagination. It reveals that the subject's "ability to resist," and therefore its own capacity for sublimity, is supported by the written law in its function as *constraint*:

Perhaps the most sublime passage in the Jewish Law is the commandment: Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven or on earth, or under the earth, etc. This commandment alone can explain the enthusiasm that the Jewish people in its civilized era felt for its religion when it compared itself with other peoples, or can explain the pride that Islam inspires. The same holds also for our presentation of the moral law, and for the predisposition within us for morality. It is indeed a mistake to worry that depriving this presentation of whatever could commend it to the senses will result in its carrying with it no more than a cold and lifeless approval without any moving force or emotion. It is exactly the other way round. For once the senses no longer see anything before them, while yet the unmistakable and indelible idea of morality remains, one would sooner need to temper the momentum of an unbounded imagination so as to keep it from rising to the level of enthusiasm, than to seek to support these ideas with images and childish devices for fear that they would otherwise be powerless. That is also why governments have gladly permitted religion to be amply furnished with such accessories: they were trying to relieve every subject of the trouble, yet also of the ability, to expand his soul's forces beyond the barriers that one can choose to set for him so as to reduce him to mere passivity and so make him more pliable.

On the other hand, this pure, elevating, and merely negative exhibition of morality involves no danger of *fanaticism*, which is the *delusion* [*Wahn*] of *wanting to SEE something beyond all bounds of sensibility* [...]. The exhibition avoids fanaticism precisely because it is merely negative.³²

State-sanctioned religious practices set up *imaginary* barriers for the subject, thereby relieving it of the trouble — but also depriving it of the ability — of exercising reason beyond those bounds. The commandment is aligned with the *removal* of those barriers and the necessity of “expanding the soul” in the absence of any support for the imagination. Importantly, however, this unbounded movement of the soul is, for Kant, inseparable from the function of the *written law*. The ban on the imaginary is introduced by a commandment, a writing whose effect is not to bind us to a particular behavior but to *remove* the support it provides. What, then, is the advantage of a purely “negative exhibition” of morality? In what sense is the “thou shalt not” of the written law indispensable to the expansion of the soul and the subjective freedom it makes possible? What prevents the commandment’s prohibition from becoming another kind of barrier or support, one that is just as confining as the images and accessories of religion and positive law?

The answer is that, even as the commandment removes the barriers and supports provided by the imaginary, it introduces a new constraint associated with its “negative” form. In order to experience its own boundlessness, the soul needs to encounter a limit. In the absence of such a limit, the imagination risks tending toward fanaticism — which, for Kant, is really the lure of the imaginary in its most seductive guise.

In “wanting to SEE something beyond all bounds of sensibility,” the fanatic may forego strictly *sensual* representations or images but nonetheless seek a “beyond” that has a distinctly imaginary character. Here, the imagination, and not the reasoning soul, is unbounded. But the written commandment, as a “negative exhibition of morality,” both removes the support of the imaginary *and* offers the constraint that is lacking in fanaticism. In substituting a purely negative exhibition for a positive representation, it guards against the lure of representation *and* against the lure of the ineffable.

In short, Kant makes clear that the commandment as *constraint* must be distinguished from any positive understanding of law as rule, norm, or prescription: It has a unique status, whose function is to constrain the imaginary with the negative exhibition proper to the symbolic and thus facilitate the unbounded exercise of freedom. I see evidence of this purely symbolic account of law in Kant’s assertion that “a righteous [*gerecht*] person” is not afraid of God. A righteous person is not someone who submits to God’s authority or obeys his orders. Rather, righteousness or rectitude refers to having law (*Recht*) as a presupposition. In *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant specifies that the moral law is not a legal prescription or norm but the simple commandment *that there be law*. The masses, manipulated by religious symbols and the delusional visions of the fanatic, are equally without law, since in both cases the imagination encounters no constraint in the form of a negative exhibition of morality. By contrast, the free and unbounded expansion of the soul in the exercise of reason is evidence, for Kant, of the self-legislating character of a reasoning faculty that is able to forego positive law precisely because it has law as a presupposition.

Critique of Judgment develops a dimension of the moral law that is not particularly foregrounded in *Critique of Practical Reason*, namely the relationship between the self-constrained character of reason in the categorical imperative and the aesthetic function of the written constraint in dynamically sublime aesthetic judgments. In the second critique, Kant defines the will as the power of rational beings “to determine their causality by the presentation of rules” and thus as a capacity to perform “actions according to principles.”³³ In the judgements human beings make about the lawfulness of their actions, he specifies that “their reason, incorruptible and self-constrained, [...] always holds the will’s maxim in an action up to the pure will, i.e., to itself inasmuch as it regards itself as practical *a priori*.”³⁴ The moral feeling of duty is therefore linked to the exercise of an “inner but intellectual constraint,”³⁵ and not to a submissive posture with respect to a superior authority.

While the second critique emphasizes the *self*-constraint of reason, the third critique links constraint to the function of writing as a limit.³⁶ It complements and completes the argument of the second critique by emphasizing that the self-constraint of reason is enabled by — if not dependent upon — an external constraint: the written commandment, whose negative exhibition of the infinite constrains the imagination, prevents it from rising to the level of fanaticism, and thereby enables it to do another kind of work. In short, it foregrounds the *aesthetic* dimension of the moral law.

It should be noted here that I am reading Kant very differently than MacCannell, who sees in Kant's postulation of will as the "principle behind the law" the very mechanism that allows Eichmann to abdicate his own desire as a subject in favor of the Führer's will. Drawing upon Hannah Arendt's analysis of Eichmann's self-declared Kantianism, MacCannell observes, "In Kant, the Law becomes a formal, empty universality by evacuation of all content. But it does not remain inert in its formal emptiness; instead, the emptiness of its form permits a certain kind of universality to be expressed as universal 'Ought' or pure positive command to duty: 'You must!' rather than an inhibition against an action 'You must not!'"³⁷ In Arendt's words, Kant's spirit demands that a man "go beyond the mere call of obedience and identify his own will with the principle behind the law — the source from which the law sprang. In Kant's philosophy that source was practical reason; in Eichmann's household use of him, it was the will of the Führer."³⁸ What, then, accounts for the profound perversion of the categorical imperative in Eichmann's household use? MacCannell follows Lacan in proposing that a "new object" resides in the purity of Kant's formally empty imperative: "no longer the pathological object he has ejected from its contents, but the 'object' present as cause in and of all Drive, the object *a* of pure excess or pure lack."³⁹ "By evacuating 'content' from the Law, while avoiding recognition of the emergence of the new, 'non-pathological' object," she writes, "Kant founded ethics on a nonpathological basis — and unwittingly empowered the Thing [*das Ding*]."⁴⁰

What prevents us from attributing this logic to Kant, in my view, is the importance that he assigns to the formal mechanism of the constraint and, in particular, to the constraint of the written law. MacCannell's argument (following Lacan) offers a very convincing diagnosis of *Critique of Practical Reason*, but it does not take up the question of how the third critique complements and completes the second by developing the aesthetic dimension of the moral law, its "negative exhibition." Here, it is a matter not of an evacuation of content but of a constraint, a constraining of the imagination that removes its sensual support or prop and obliges it to encounter what I am calling the lack in the Other. Indeed, in *Critique of Judgment*, Kant might even be read as addressing the very problem MacCannell identifies in the formulation of the categorical imperative, as if he were acknowledging the importance of a formal barrier or constraint (a constraint that is, in this sense, external to the subject and not merely the "inner and intellectual constraint" of duty) as an aid to the disabling of the sensible or of any prescriptive content that prevents it from veering into fanaticism. The third critique could, in this sense, be read as correcting or amending the presentation of the categorical imperative in *Critique of Practical Reason* by stressing the difference between a "negative exhibition" and a formal "emptiness" or void.

Kant's analysis of the commandment distinguishes between the imaginary dimension of law as a representation of an authority or an existing state of affairs and its properly symbolic dimension, the structural function of the written law as constraint. In the process, he shows the dimension of constraint in the written law to be indispensable in sustaining the very thing that is often opposed to it in contemporary discussions of politics: will. Will, for Kant, is not antinomial to written constraints, since the two are really inseparable. He links the exercise of the will to the cultivation of what might be called a *practice of the letter*, which is quite different from respect for the authority of law or adherence to the rule it transmits.



Although it would be a mistake simply to conflate such a practice with Judaism, Kant appeals to the Jewish commandment tradition as the site of a specific reflection on the function of the written. The same point is made in a different way by a celebrated passage from the Babylonian Talmud. The passage concerns a dispute between the Sages about whether certain objects are clean or unclean. The great Rabbi Eliezer, who plays a central role in many a Talmud discussion, finds himself on the opposite side of the majority. He brings forward every imaginable argument in support of his position but to no avail. Finally, in exasperation, he invokes the *halachah* (the system of rabbinic law) and invites it to intervene on his behalf: “If the *halachah* agrees with me, let this carob-tree prove it!” At that very instant the carob tree uproots itself and moves a hundred cubits. Unswayed by this apparent miracle, the other Sages retort, “No proof can be brought from a carob-tree.” Again, Eliezer declares, “If the *halachah* agrees with me, let the stream of water prove it!” When the stream of water obliges by promptly flowing backwards, the Sages again rejoin, “No proof can be brought from a stream of water.” This goes on and on, until Eliezer says,

“If the *halachah* agrees with me, let it be proved from Heaven!” Whereupon a Heavenly Voice cried out: “Why do ye dispute with R. Eliezer, seeing that in all matters the *halachah* agrees with him!” But R. Joshua arose and exclaimed: “*It is not in heaven*” (Deut. 30:12). What did he mean by this? — Said R. Jeremiah: That the Torah had already been given at Mount Sinai; we pay no attention to a Heavenly Voice, because Thou hast long since written in the Torah at Mount Sinai, *After the majority one must incline*. (Exodus 23:2)

R. Nathan met Elijah and asked him: What did the Holy One, Blessed be He, do in that hour?—He laughed [with joy], he replied, saying, “My sons have defeated Me, My sons have defeated Me.”⁴¹

If Eliezer invokes Heaven and solicits miracles to bolster his case, it must be that he believes the law to be guaranteed or authorized by God. But the other rabbis rightly interpret the written law to have its own authority, inseparable from the procedures of interpretation and debate implied in majority rule. How, then, should one interpret the miraculous signs that issue forth at Eliezer's request and God's own testimony on his behalf? Perhaps these competing authorities are meant to imply that, although the written law may indeed be of divine origin, it does not answer to the spiritual authority of the Heavenly Voice. It is an instrument of justice only to the extent that men struggle with it — collectively, in this case — to reach a decision that alone is sovereign.

MacCannell's reading of Eichmann allows us to further develop the stakes of the written law in this tradition, suggesting that it does not simply render obsolete the authority of the voice but explicitly defends against its status as the fantasmatic "principle behind the law." In his commentary of the handing down of the law in Exodus 20, which is introduced by the verse "and God spoke all of these words [all together],"⁴² the medieval rabbi Rashi suggests that the voice of God took the form of a single terrifying utterance, which was so unbearable that the people of Israel begged Moses to shield them from God's voice by reading the commandments for them, thereby mediating its awesome force.⁴³ This gloss contests the stock reading according to which Judaism is marked by the tragedy of God's absence, his withdrawal from the dead letter that signs his retreat from the human community. Rashi makes clear that the Israelites' relation to God is marked by a profound dread of the unmediated voice, an insight that casts the stakes of the written law in a different light.⁴⁴

Recourse to the written law does not actually eliminate the imaginary and real dimensions of the law, which in these examples are still very much in play: God is there, palpably hovering over the scene in a very imaginary guise, his terrifyingly real voice reverberating in the ears (or at least the minds) of the assembled. The real, for Lacan, is not the beyond of speech but one of its dimensions, whence his definition of the voice as the "product and object fallen from the organ of speech."⁴⁵ But while the symbolic character of the written law does not replace or disable its imaginary and real dimensions, it does have the effect of putting them at a distance, thereby diluting their force. In the same way, God as a might is not a fantasy or an illusion for Kant; but neither does his existence as a fearsome might diminish or overtake the symbolic sphere opened up by the voluntary submission to constraints in a sublime aesthetic judgment. God, considered as a might, is sublime — an object of sublimation — inasmuch as it calls on us to resist it and, therefore, to exercise our humanity. Kant specifies that fearful manifestations of nature can become "attractive," can be judged aesthetically, "provided we are in a safe place."⁴⁶ It follows that a sublime aesthetic judgment supposes a *distance* between the subject and the might he contemplates. However, this distance is not to be equated narrowly with the *physical* distance that separates the observer from the erupting volcano, since it is also sustained by recourse to the written law in its function as constraint.

In arguing that the Mosaic law allows for sublimation, Freud is really suggesting that the law obliges the Israelites to relinquish this fantasy object that gives consistency to the Other's "will" or demand (the voice as object *a*) and to confront the lack in the Other by traversing the negative space opened up by the commandments. For Lacan, sublimation differs from the fantasy in providing a direct satisfaction of the drive through "objects that are socially valorized, objects of which the group approves, insofar as they are objects of public utility."⁴⁷ He suggests that the process of sublimation is concerned not merely with the construction of a new object that the collectivity finds to be of value, but also with the fall of the imaginary object or ideal ego and the resulting emptiness it exposes: "in every form of sublimation, emptiness is determinative" (130). Religious forms of social organization are generally at odds with sublimation, since "religion in all its forms consists of avoiding this emptiness. We can illustrate that in forcing the note of Freudian analysis, for the good reason that Freud emphasized the obsessional traits of religious behavior" (130). Nevertheless, the Mosaic religion reveals that, in some instances, religious practice can actually establish the conditions under which sublimation becomes possible. In such a case, Lacan says, "a phrase like 'respecting this emptiness' perhaps goes further [...]. [T]he emptiness remains in the center, and that is precisely why sublimation is involved" (130).

With the institution of the Jewish law, Moses creates a structure or a space in which the subject can encounter and explore the lack in the Other in a creative manner, without being so consumed by anxiety that it violently rejects and represses that lack. This is what we see in the practice of oral law, or Talmud, where the collectivity engages in the exploration of God's absence as the creative foundation of the rabbinic community. The law is a structure that allows for a work on the absent Other and, in this respect, functions as a sublimation for the age — and, indeed, for subsequent ages. As Kant attests, the sublimation functions not only for members of the Mosaic religion, but also, potentially, for anyone who takes up this object.

The "dynamically sublime contemplation of might" is linked to the psychic function of sublimation in being concerned with an object (what Kant calls the "indelible idea of morality") that does not strictly speaking exist, that is not available to sense perception or the imagination, but that may nonetheless be explored by means of the commandment. The law is an instrumentation of sublimation that allows for the presentation of this object without refusing its negative character or seeking to recover it in the real; it substitutes a "purely negative exhibition" for a positive representation, facilitating the subject's "expansion of his soul," rather than erecting barriers against it.

This is the essence of Kant's distinction between superstition and religion. Superstition involves the abdication of the subject's freedom to a superior might, while religion involves a process of transcendence in which the reasoning faculty, in the experience of the sublime, finds within itself an attitude that is commensurate with God's sublimity and thus precludes any such prostration. What superstition establishes in the mind is not a reverence for the sublime but "fear and dread of that being of superior might to whose

will the terrified person finds himself subjected but without holding him in esteem; and this can obviously give rise to nothing but ingratiating and fawning, never to a religion based on good conduct.”⁴⁸ In true religion there is thus a *distance* between the subject and God, who ceases to be the fearful enforcing presence that we see in superstition. It follows that the *truly* religious person can forego God altogether, since God’s sublimity is merely the occasion for the exercise of his own sublimity (making of God less an arbiter or authority than a kind of thought experiment).⁴⁹ What Kant calls “religion” is thus a form of *work*, the free exercise of the reasoning faculty, while superstition is a passive abdication of the activity of the mind.

CONSTRAINT DEGREE ZERO

In 1960, in Paris, Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais founded the experimental literary collective Oulipo, whose name stands for *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle* (*Workroom of Potential Literature*). Oulipo, which today numbers more than 30 members worldwide (and whose ranks have included such figures as Georges Perec, Marcel Duchamp, and Italo Calvino), is dedicated to a textual practice defined by voluntary submission to formal constraints. These constraints may take any number of forms, including traditional fixed poetic forms like the sonnet or haiku; the mathematical constraints involved in the production of algorithms or combinatorics; and the literal constraints implied in written forms, such as metagrams, palindromes, and lipograms, which involve the reordering, substitution, or elimination of letters — the best known of which is Georges Perec’s 1969 lipogrammatic novel *La Disparition* (literally *The Disappearance*, translated into English as *A Void*), a work of more than 300 pages written without the letter “e.”

Oulipians embrace the hypothesis implied in Kant’s aesthetics — that the subject’s freedom, understood as the free exercise of its will, may actually depend upon laws and constraints. But they also develop another dimension of the constraint by identifying it with a literal practice that has nothing to do with the domain of law in any traditional sense. Oulipo is concerned not merely with elaborating a new writing practice, however, since there is a pretension to something like a *regeneration of the symbolic* through this voluntary submission to constraints. In this venture, they also allow us to think through the aesthetic dimension of psychoanalytic technique.

Oulipian Marcel Bénabou describes the constraint as a way of “passing from language to writing.”⁵⁰ It allows us to access what he describes as the “functional modes of language and writing,” which come into relief when language is “treated as an object in itself, considered in its materiality, and thus freed from its subservience to its signification obligation” (41). It is not, however, merely a matter of freeing language from its instrumental use as a tool of signification. Oulipo’s very Kantian claim is that constraints actually *set us free*. Perec writes of the “liberating potential of rigorous formal constraint,” advancing that “the suppression of the letter, of the typographical sign, of the basic prop, is a purer, more objective, more

decisive operation, something like *constraint degree zero*, after which everything becomes possible” (13). At stake, however, are not only new literary possibilities, but also latent possibilities within the writer as a subject. In Bénabou’s words, “it is not only the virtualities of language that are revealed by constraint, but also the virtualities of [he] who accepts to submit himself to constraint” (43). The constraint therefore gives rise not only to a poetics of the literary text, but also to what might be termed a poetics of subjectivity. It supports the emergence of a virtual subject, a subject that is solicited and sustained by the struggle with the creative constraints implied in a practice of the letter.

The function of formal written constraints in the work of Oulipo resonates powerfully with psychoanalysis. Indeed, “the subject who accepts to submit himself to constraint” actually offers a very precise definition of the analysand under transference — this subject is “virtual,” in that the subject of the unconscious is a pure hypothesis that cannot be verified empirically. It is witnessed only in speech, in those discontinuities and slips of the tongue that interrupt the discourse of the ego. The subject of psychoanalysis is a subject that can be known or constructed only on the condition that it be called forth under the constraint of the transference and constrained to *write*.

In advancing that writing is a constraint that enables the emergence of the subject, Oulipo allows us to understand something crucial about the role of constraints in psychoanalysis and also about the unconscious as a scene of writing. What Perec and other Oulipians call “writing” is not merely the production of texts but a specific modality of language that involves an encounter with an obstacle, limit, or empty space that interrupts the relation to language conceived as spontaneous conversation or as the communication of presence. It thus coincides precisely with what Lacan names the symbolic, that register of language in which the subject’s desire is correlated to a lack in the Other or that “constraint degree zero” that Perec makes the condition of possibility of the literary text and of subjective freedom alike. But these examples also draw out a dimension of the symbolic that is often overlooked — what I am calling its aesthetic dimension. The symbolic is something other than the loss of natural satisfaction to the signifier, which is an unavoidable necessity for the speaking being. It is a creative support for the subject of desire. In an early definition proposed by the group, Oulipians are characterized as “rats who must build the labyrinth from which they propose to escape” (22). The constraint offers a way of molding and shaping (and so, too, taking control of) the subject’s subjection to the signifier, thereby making a potential prison into a provocation to creative freedom.

Oulipo’s most important contribution to the field of aesthetics is the demonstration that constraints enable freedom by defending against *inspiration*. Queneau proposes that the task of Oulipo is to elaborate “a whole arsenal in which the poet may pick and choose, whenever he wishes to escape from that which is called inspiration” (10). But why would anyone need to escape inspiration? And what, then, is the relationship between escaping a labyrinth that one builds and escaping inspiration? In Queneau’s words, “the inspiration that consists in blind obedience to every impulse is in reality a sort of slavery. The classical

playwright who writes his tragedy observing a certain number of familiar rules is freer than the poet who writes that which comes into his head and who is the slave of other rules of which he is ignorant” (18).

The stakes of this claim can be understood, by contrast, with Surrealism, whose understanding of freedom it specifically rejects. In his first “Manifesto of Surrealism,” for example, André Breton gives voice to a very traditional and widespread view according to which freedom is necessarily freedom *from* the law, freedom from constraints of all kinds: social norms and conventions, moral inhibitions, and even the rules and conventions of genre, all of which are conceived as inhibiting the free reign of the imagination. Strikingly, however, this “freedom from” goes hand in hand with a marginalization of the subject and, in particular, the subject’s volition or will. The poet is understood as nothing more than the passive receptacle of an inspiration that breaks in on his consciousness, in the form of gratuitous phrases that come “knocking at the window.”⁵¹ The Manifesto ultimately relies upon a very classical notion of “inspiration” according to which the human being is an inert vessel “animated” by a divine creator or spirit. Breton defines a “surreal” image as a “fortuitous juxtaposition of two terms” (37) in which the mind plays no role.⁵² It follows, he writes, that the poet should make “no effort whatsoever to filter,” but instead he should aspire to be a “simple receptacle” of the echoes he transcribes, a “modest recording instrument” who “serves a nobler cause” (28). But what cause, or whose cause, is it? As Breton writes, “It is true of Surrealist images as it is of opium images that man does not evoke them: rather they ‘come to him spontaneously, despotically. He cannot chase them away: for the will is powerless now and no longer controls the faculties’ (Baudelaire)” (36).

To this involuntary or “automatic” submission to inspiration, the writers of Oulipo oppose the voluntary submission to constraint as enabling a different relation to freedom, not as a freedom *from* obstacles or limits, but as a freedom *to* that foregrounds the activity of the will. If, for Breton, writing is secondary with respect to the “voice” of inspiration, the mere record or transcript of the poet’s surrender to a superior force, then, for Oulipians, it is writing — and, above all, the constraint that structures its practice — that comes first, enabling the exercise of a freedom that is inseparable from this practice. Queneau maintains that

the poet is never inspired, if by that one means that inspiration is a function of humor, of temperature, of political circumstances, of subjective chance, or of the subconscious. The poet is never inspired, because he is the master of that which appears to others as inspiration [...]. [T]he powers of poetry are always at his disposition, subjected to his will, submissive to his own activity.⁵³

It is in this sense that François Le Lionnais, in a celebration of the “liberating virtue of form,” writes that “nine or ten centuries ago, when a potential writer proposed the sonnet form, he left, through certain mechanical processes, the possibility of a choice.”⁵⁴

These comments point to another profound structural analogy between Oulipo's practice of writing under constraint and the technique of psychoanalysis. In inventing the unconscious and calling upon it to construct a knowledge under the constraint of the transference, Freud creates a mechanism that allows the analysand to traverse the fantasy, making it into the object of a possible choice, rather than a deterministic inevitability. Admittedly, however, the equation between written constraints and the technique of psychoanalysis is potentially problematic on at least two counts: first, because of Oulipo's emphasis on volition and will — which seems far removed from the concerns of psychoanalysis — and, second, because of their repudiation of any aesthetic practice founded on the exploration of the “subconscious” as antithetical to free choice.

Indeed, Queneau insists on the voluntary, conscious dimension of artistic practice and consistently and vigorously opposes any aesthetic practice that relies upon involuntary or automatic processes or submission to chance, all of which he identifies with the unconscious — or, more precisely, the subconscious (*subconscient*).⁵⁵ But this is because Queneau takes from Breton a reductive understanding of the unconscious as a wholly alien province of the mind or as that deep, dark repository of unbridled impulses that Freud identifies with the id.⁵⁶ When he charges that the poet who impulsively writes whatever comes into his head is the “slave of other rules of which he is ignorant,” Queneau is actually equating these “other rules” with the rules of the unconscious, understood in Breton's terms as a “fortuitous juxtaposition of terms” that does not answer to constraints of any kind.

I would counter, however, that these “other rules” are not the laws of the unconscious, as Freud understands it, but of the fantasy and its imaginary staging. Queneau confirms as much when, in response to the question of whether Oulipo is “in favor of literary madmen,” he states that “the only literature is voluntary literature.”⁵⁷ In asserting that the writer who is subject to a delusion or fantasy is the slave of his supposed “freedom,” Queneau is saying nothing that we do not also find in Freud. To write “freely” and without restrictions is to be subject to a fantasy of which the writer is merely an instrument; to write under constraint is to constrain that fantasy and, therefore, to know the possibility of true freedom. In the same way, Freud proposes that the unconscious under the constraint of the transference investigates and constructs the fantasy, allowing it to become the object of a possible choice, rather than a deterministic inevitability.

While Queneau's references to reason and will may seem far removed from the domain of psychoanalysis, the preceding discussion of written constraints allows us to appreciate that the unconscious under constraints is an eminently rational mechanism. Reason, for Freud, is not an attribute of the *conscious* mind but of the mind as such (whether conscious or unconscious). He shows us that reason and the unconscious are not opposed and that the unconscious is necessarily a rational unconscious.⁵⁸

Similarly, when Warren Motte describes the Oulipian enterprise as “a sustained attack on the aleatory in literature, a crusade for the maximal motivation of the literary sign,”⁵⁹ he might well be speaking of the unconscious itself. Contrary to Breton’s reading, there is nothing fortuitous or accidental about the Freudian unconscious, whose implacable logic is eminently rational and formally excludes any notion of chance. Crucially, the unconscious is not the opposite of consciousness, nor is it distinct from the mind. It is a symbolic mechanism that allows for the formal construction, under constraints, of a mental object.⁶⁰

This claim may seem counterintuitive. Does the constraint not violate the cardinal rule of psychoanalysis, the law of free association, according to which no restrictions whatever may be placed on the associative stream of thoughts, words, and images? To identify the technique of free association with the free reign of the imagination, as Breton does,⁶¹ is to propagate a widespread misunderstanding of the unconscious, for which Surrealism — as the first unfortunate foray into the relation between psychoanalysis and literary production — bears much of the responsibility.⁶² It ignores the fact that free association is simultaneously *unrestricted* and *constrained*. In the clinic of the dream, for example, the seemingly endless associations to which its elements give rise inevitably butt up against the navel of the dream, the hole to which free association leads, the unrepresentable kernel around which it turns. The essential point is that association in language is “free” precisely to the extent that these substitutions revolve around an absent center. Under the constraint of the transference, free association leads to this lack in the Other that is, for Lacan, the essence of the symbolic and constrains the subject to confront it in order to traverse the seduction fantasy and experience the falling away of the imaginary Other it supposes: the Other of demand, love, or even inspiration. Breton’s understanding of the Other as the source of inspiration emphasizes the imaginary Other to the exclusion of the symbolic or lacking Other, the finite language whose capacity for free play is a direct consequence of the lack at its center.⁶³ Put another way, his conception of the unconscious is one from which the function of *writing* is excluded.

In its critique of this exclusion, Oulipo exposes the fallacy of a certain conception of the unconscious and writing as a “writing of the Other,” and allows us to much more precisely locate the stakes of the symbolic, the Other, and writing in psychoanalysis. At issue is what it means to consider the subject of psychoanalysis as a subject subjected to language, to the Other: on the one hand, a deterministic understanding of the subject as programmed or ventriloquized by a voice that subverts its agency and, on the other, a properly psychoanalytic account of the subject as assuming its desire — and therefore its freedom — in the creative assumption of the lack in (and of) the Other. Perec shows that “everything becomes possible” only when lack is assumed, when the “missing center” is accepted as the condition of language.⁶⁴

Oulipo’s treatment of constraint brings out a dimension of psychoanalysis that is not obvious: Despite its emphasis on the determinant character of unconscious fantasy, psychoanalysis takes the subject’s freedom as its endpoint. Like Oulipo, it supposes that freedom or free choice is made possible

by a particular kind of work, the struggle with constraints; it supposes a *practice* of freedom, or an understanding of freedom as the result of a particular kind of work, rather than an ontological conception of freedom as an inborn attribute of the living being that can only be compromised by the application of external constraints or restrictions. As in Kant's aesthetics, this work has something to do with the exercise of the will and with reason, and it is powerfully opposed to any evocation of "the Other" as a kind of dictatorial agency. The transference is a tool to defend against what Oulipians call "inspiration" or the submission to an imaginary Other that Kant identifies with "fanaticism." It is the foundation of an ethics of emancipation, an ethics that supposes a practice of constraints.

THE SYMBOLIC AND THE SOCIAL LINK

Each of these examples demonstrates, in a very modest way, that even if traditional symbolic laws are no longer "compelling fictions," a practice of written constraints can nonetheless support the symbolic without recourse to law in the traditional, patriarchal sense.⁶⁵ For Bénabou, Oulipo "seeks to *formulate problems* and eventually to *offer solutions* that allow any and everybody to construct, letter by letter, word by word, a text."⁶⁶ More than that, he proposes that the "Oulipian act par excellence" is to "create a structure, [...] to propose an as yet undiscovered mode of organization for linguistic objects."⁶⁷ But while the structures Bénabou has in mind are primarily textual, François Le Lionnais, in his "Second Manifesto" of Oulipo, is more ambitious: He proposes that Oulipo aims to generate "artificial structures" that might "take root in the cultural tissue of a society," producing "leaf, flower, and fruit."⁶⁸ This is really the essence of the symbolic, to create new practices or mechanisms that sustain the subject in the exercise of its desire or freedom.

Oulipo makes a distinction between what it calls "experimental" and "normative" uses of constraint. For the first poets who elaborated and developed the sonnet form, its constraints were experimental; but with the gradual codification of the form, those constraints become normative. If traditional laws belong to the order of "normative" constraints, then the constrained writing of Oulipo, the practice of psychoanalysis, and sublime aesthetic judgments belong to the "experimental." Each of these new structures advances a dynamic understanding of the symbolic, not as a reified set of inherited rules, norms, or traditions, but as a creative process of devising compelling fictions. In this sense, Kant could be read as trying to renew the experimental dimension of the Decalogue, which risks being received as nothing more than a normative constraint whose capacity to call forth reason in the experience of the sublime is no longer appreciated. When the ten commandments descend through familiarity to the status of normative constraints, we no longer experience them as sublime because they seem merely to uphold a morality and not to provide an opportunity for the exercise of free will in the formulation of the categorical imperative. His argument can, in turn, be read as elevating the kind of experience Oulipo is describing, by suggesting that the kinds of structures Oulipo invents might be understood as taking the place or fulfilling the function that religions used to have, namely that of creating a space in which a certain kind of transcendence becomes possible.

“Experimental” implies an *experience*, something the subject undergoes. There is a practice of the letter, an engagement with language in its literality that is also a form of *work* — one that exalts the will. The essential point is that, in the absence of such work, the will does not have the opportunity to exercise itself. This experimental register necessarily involves the individual subject, whereas the normative operates much more broadly. But each of the examples I have discussed here suggests that, wherever the normative exists to the exclusion of the experimental, a constraint risks becoming nothing more than a rule, thereby losing its properly symbolic force.



1. Juliet Flower MacCannell, "Facing Fascism: A Feminine Politics of Jouissance," in *Lacan, Politics, Aesthetics*, ed. Willy Apollon and Richard Feldstein (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 67. A different version of this essay was later published as a chapter in *The Hysteric's Guide to the Future Female Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). Subsequent consecutive references will appear parenthetically within the text.
2. Such an abdication represents the systematic overturning of what Lacan holds to be the fundamental formulation of the ethics of psychoanalysis: the imperative not to give up on one's desire and the lack that it supposes.
3. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002), 45.
4. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Middlesex: Harmondsworth, 1963), 136-37; emphasis added.
5. *Ibid.*, 136.
6. *Ibid.*, 148. See also MacCannell, "Facing Fascism," in *Lacan, Politics, Aesthetics*, 83.
7. MacCannell, "Facing Fascism," in *Lacan, Politics, Aesthetics*, 75. Subsequent consecutive references will appear parenthetically within the text.
8. Jacques Lacan, *Television: A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment*, ed. Joan Copjec, trans. Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss, Annette Michelson, and Jeffery Mehlman (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1990), 87.
9. MacCannell, "Facing Fascism," in *Lacan, Politics, Aesthetics*, 70.
10. *Ibid.*, 82.
11. Pierre Legendre, "'Les juifs se livrent à des interprétations insensées': Expertise d'un texte," in *La Psychanalyse est-elle une histoire juive?: Colloque de Montpellier, 1980*, ed. Adélie and Jean-Jacques Rassial (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1981), 105-6.
12. Legendre, "The Masters of Law," in *Law and the Unconscious: A Legendre Reader*, ed. Peter Goodrich, trans. Peter Goodrich, Alain Potage, and Anton Schütz (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 109.
13. *Ibid.*, 111. Legendre advances that the Romano-Christian approach to the text is "founded in a discourse which denies the essential quality of the relation of the body to writing"; "its basic characteristics can be set out by means of a fundamental Romano-pontifical maxim: the Emperor carries all the archives in his breast (*omnia scrinia habet in pectore suo*)" (110, 109). In contrast, he observes that "in other legal traditions, most notably the Islamic and Talmudic, our ways of dealing with texts seem like an imposture" (107-8). In Talmudic law, for example, "circumcision becomes for each subject the mark of an interpreter and the proof of his allegiance to the absolute Writing or, in psychoanalytic terms, of the relationship between the human subject and the logical place of the Other" (110-11). In this tradition, law is not a description of an existing order or the representation of a lawgiving authority; it is a text whose meaning is uncertain. Writing is

understood not as the more or less transparent medium of communication, the bearer of a message that originates elsewhere, but as a form of inscription that implicates the subject in a process of interpretation determined from the outset as structurally incomplete. Fidelity to the “absolute Writing” is thus a fidelity to the letter in its undecidable character, a writing that cannot be completed “spiritually.” In the diaspora context in which the Talmud originates, there is no privileged mediator or interpreter of the law, no court of last recourse. The object of rabbinic commentary is not to fill this vacuum with an authoritative interpretation that would determine or decide the meaning of the law; instead, it is to model an approach to religious practice based on the necessity of wrestling with the letter of the text. In the paratactic style typical of Talmudic commentary, many different glosses are presented side by side, without any subordination or synthesis. In its non-decisionist character, this interpretation of law foregrounds the decompletion of the symbolic, the absence of a final arbiter — including God himself.

14. Legendre, ““Les juifs se livrent à des interprétations insensées,”” in *La Psychanalyse est-elle une histoire juive?* 112. The same could arguably be said of Badiou’s own work, which in many respects conceives of itself as an extension of that tradition. His work assigns itself the task of undoing the “linguistic turn” in philosophy, in favor, alternately, of a non-finitist conception of the subject, of a recourse to mathematics as a non-imaginary, non-representational construction, or of a theory of the event as a “rupture” with an existing “situation” or normative order, an order that is frequently identified with writing.
15. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992), 174.
16. *Ibid.*, 69.
17. Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism: Three Essays*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (hereafter *S.E.*) ed. and trans. James Strachey et al. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), 23:85-86.
18. Moses teaches that “the deity disdained sacrifice and ceremonial and asked only for faith and a life in truth and justice” (*Ibid.*, 23:51).
19. Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 174.
20. *Ibid.*, 81.
21. Julia Reinhard Lupton and Kenneth Reinhard, “The Subject of Religion: Lacan and the Ten Commandments,” in *diacritics* 33.2 (2003): 83.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, in *S.E.* 23:43. Subsequent consecutive references will appear parenthetically within the text.
24. Romans 7:5-6.
25. Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, in *S.E.* 23:88.

26. "I should not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'you shall not covet'" (Romans 7:7).
27. This is why the broad mass of Jews — whose history is transmitted unconsciously by Paul — hate the Mosaic order: it obliges them to confront the lack in the Other, the falling away of the ideal ego at stake in identification.
28. Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 19.
29. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 119.
30. *Ibid.*, 120.
31. Kant specifies that these fearful manifestations of natural might can become "attractive," can be judged aesthetically, "provided we are in a safe place" (*Ibid.*). It follows that a sublime aesthetic judgment supposes a *distance* between the subject and the might he contemplates, the maintaining of which is one function of the recourse to the written law as constraint.
32. *Ibid.*, 135.
33. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 47.
34. *Ibid.*
35. *Ibid.*, 48.
36. Kant also clarifies the stakes of "rationality" for Freud, which is a matter not merely of refusing superstition and mysticism in the name of a more scientific worldview (as one might infer from Freud's comment that the pharaoh Ahkenaton, in basing the doctrine of monotheism on the cult of the sun god, actually anticipates the scientific discovery that the sun is the source of all life), but of freeing oneself (from superstition, the father imago, and ultimately the superego) through the struggle with constraints. Kant shows that reason and writing go hand in hand, inasmuch as written constraints enable the free exercise of the will.
37. MacCannell, "Facing Fascism," in *Lacan, Politics, Aesthetics*, 71-72.
38. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 136-37. See also MacCannell, "Facing Fascism," in *Lacan, Politics, Aesthetics*, 71-72.
39. MacCannell, "Facing Fascism," in *Lacan, Politics, Aesthetics*, 72.
40. *Ibid.*
41. Rabbi Dr. I. Epstein, ed., *The Babylonian Talmud, Seder Nezikin Volume II: Baba Mezi'a* (London: Soncino, 1935), tractate 59b, 352-53; brackets in original.
42. Exodus 20:1
43. "Rashi explains that first all the commandments were uttered by God in a single instant. Then, God repeated the first two commandments word for word. Following that, the people were afraid that they could no longer endure the awesome holiness of God's voice and they asked that Moses repeat the remaining eight commandments to them." *Aseres Had-*

bro, *The Ten Commandments: A New Translation with a Commentary Anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic, and Rabbinic Sources*, ed. Rabbis Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz (Brooklyn: Artscroll Mesorah, 1981), 23.

44. Lacan suggests that the Mosaic religion marks a radical break from its antecedents in being organized not around the demands of an all-powerful being but around “the desire of a God who is the God of Moses” (Lacan, *Television*, 90). In foregrounding the question of God’s desire, the Mosaic religion substitutes for the jouissance of an all-powerful Other a law-based observance predicated on lack. In Lacan’s words,

The Hebrew hates the metaphysico-sexual rites which unite in celebration the community to God’s jouissance. He accords special value to the gap separating desire and fulfillment. The symbol of that gap we find in the same context of *El Shadday’s* relation to Abraham, in which, primordially, is born the law of circumcision, which gives as a sign of the covenant between the people and the desire of he who has chosen them what?—that little piece of flesh sliced off. (Lacan, *Television*, 94)

In its affirmation of the gap separating desire and fulfillment, the Mosaic tradition underscores not only the impossibility of fulfilling the Other, but also the necessity of renounc-

ing such an undertaking. Importantly, though, it signals the castration not only of the human subject, but also of God himself: If God cannot be satisfied he is not all-powerful.

45. *Ibid.*, 87.
46. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 120.
47. Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 94. Subsequent consecutive references will appear parenthetically within the text.
48. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 123.
49. In Lacan’s terms, we might say that, for the one who grovels before God’s might, this God is an imaginary Other; for the one who practices true religion, there is something akin to the traversal of the space of the symbolic as Lacan imagines it.
50. Warren Motte, ed. and trans., *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature* (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 1986), 41. Subsequent consecutive references will appear parenthetically within the text.
51. André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 21. Subsequent consecutive references will appear parenthetically within the text.
52. In Breton’s words, “All that results from listening to oneself, from reading what one has written, is the suspension of the occult, that admirable help” (33).
53. Motte, *Oulipo*, 43.

54. Ibid., 9.
55. “Another entirely false idea in fashion nowadays is the equivalence which is established between inspiration, exploration of the subconscious, and liberation; between chance, automatism, and freedom” (Ibid., 18). In calling this “zone of exploration” the “subconscious,” Queneau is actually putting his finger on a characteristic feature of Breton’s appropriation of Freud, namely his tendency to substitute a topographical understanding of the unconscious as an alien province of the mind for a dynamic understanding of the unconscious as interpretation.
56. Freud argues that the “truly dynamic” understanding of the unconscious as a mechanism of interpretation must be distinguished from the increasingly widespread use of the term “unconscious” to “denote a mental *province* rather than a quality of what is mental.” *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, in *S.E.* 22:71; emphasis added. He proposes that the impersonal pronoun “id” (*Es*, “it”) be used to express “the main characteristic of this province of the mind — the fact of its being alien to the ego” (ibid., 22:72).
57. Motte, *Oulipo*, 6.
58. In the same way, the problem of the will is not antithetical to a psychoanalytic theory of the subject but expresses something essential about the work of the unconscious under transference. Where they intersect is in their respective recourses to constraint.
59. Motte, *Oulipo*, 17.
60. In Gilles Deleuze’s elegant formulation, “the unconscious is made neither of desires nor of representations, [since] it is ‘always empty,’ consisting solely in the structural laws that it imposes on representations and on desires.” “How Do We Recognize Structuralism?” in *Desert Islands and Other Texts: 1953-1974*, ed. David Lapoujade, trans. Michael Taomina (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004), 181.
61. Thanks to Freud, he writes, “the imagination is perhaps on the point of reasserting itself, of reclaiming its rights” (Breton, *Manifestoes*, 10).
62. To illustrate this fallacy we need only consider how surrealist painters of the stripe Breton promotes make use of the dream; Salvador Dali, for example, paints “dream worlds,” scenes that have the “look” of dreams. Such treatments tend to draw upon the visual aspect of the dream more than upon the dreamwork as a *language*. At most there is a reflection on what Freud calls the “considerations of representability,” or the plastic transformations through which latent dream thoughts are translated into images. There is no meditation on the logic of the dream, the operations of condensation and displacement that determine the logic of the substitutions, or the dream’s status as an interpretation. The unconscious, for Breton, is a “depth” and not (as in Freud) a surface, a matter of language. It follows that Breton is really celebrating the id, not the unconscious. In contrast, Freud is critical of the depth metaphor that holds the unconscious to be a “hidden reality” or repository of “dark forces,” emphasizing instead the superficial character of the unconscious, which manifests itself as a discontinuity in speech, slips of the

tongue, and so forth. (It would be interesting to contrast Dali's evocation of the "unconscious" with Magritte, who is much closer to Freud in emphasizing the function of the signifier, the way in which the unconscious appears as a discontinuity in the surface and not as a "hidden world" or "depth." *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*: the signifier is not the object but neither is there any depth "behind" this surface.) Importantly, the unconscious, for Freud, is not distinct from the mind. While Breton equates the "mind" with consciousness, Freud sees consciousness as only one dimension of mental life.

63. In the well-known words of Jacques Derrida, language is a field of "play, [...] a field of infinite substitutions only because it is finite, that is to say, because [...] there is something missing from it: a center which arrests and grounds the play of substitutions." *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 289.
64. In view of what I have just said, Queneau's insistence on the agency of the will, and on the "mastery" of the imagination by consciousness, may itself give pause — especially to psychoanalytically inclined readers. Is not an affirmation of "will," "consciousness," or "mastery" inherently at odds with the supposition that lack is itself the condition of the subject's desire or freedom? After all, to adhere to a particular rhyme scheme or to suppress a letter from a text is quite different from affirming that there is a fundamental, structural, and insurmountable lack in language; to voluntarily constrain the composition of a text by rendering certain linguistic possibilities off-limits could even be interpreted as a refusal of the lack in
- the Other, a lack that is not a matter of choice but a structural inevitability for the speaking being. In affirming the "mastery" of the will, Queneau might even be understood as radically rejecting the very notion of the Other, and not only in its imaginary guise as the animating "spirit" of inspiration. However, Queneau's conception of the will is not a naïve intentionalism but closely tied to his understanding of writing as a constrained activity. A constrained system is not a system from which lack is excluded, as one might potentially infer from his affirmation of "voluntary" literature as an exclusion of the aleatory. While it may be opposed to "inspiration" and to the submissive or subservient posture toward the Other it implies, a constrained writing is not a writing that eliminates the Other altogether. It engages the lack in the symbolic Other that is not a source of "inspiration" or of "spirit" but rather the absent center of a finite language that itself gives rise to a multitude of substitutions and permutations.
65. Gregor Cantor's definition of mathematics as "freedom realized through constraints" captures very well this understanding of the symbolic and the way in which it can take forms other than law. See *Gesammelte Abhandlungen* (Berlin: Lokay, 1932), 182.
66. Motte, *Oulipo*, 46.
67. *Ibid.*
68. *Ibid.*

WHY WRITERS?

catherine millot

I always encounter a certain embarrassment when I have to try to explain what it is that I practice, namely the reading of works of literature clarified by psychoanalysis. Of course, I never really engage in this practice without having the feeling that I am overstepping something, but I am nonetheless even more embarrassed when it is a matter of questioning it. My embarrassment is intensified by the fact that it has to do with Lacan, and this in particular is what leads me to pose the following question: Why does the fact that my embarrassment involves the relation between Lacan and literature tend to accentuate this sentiment in such a way and to such an extent that I feel like I have nothing to say?

Nothing to say. As an analyst, one often hears this on the couch. It is a completely ordinary and banal sign of resistance. So, I decided to begin my inquiry from precisely this point: If I have nothing to say, what is it that I do not want to talk about? And, for that matter, why not grab hold of the thread presented by the sense of overstepping I experience whenever it is a question of the relation between psychoanalysis and literature, which in turn leads me to the question of the legitimacy of studying literature with psychoanalysis? Indeed, psychoanalysis is often reproached for being reductive. Freud, moreover, did not contradict this

point. In a text entitled “The Goethe Prize,” which is devoted to the analysis of one of Goethe’s childhood memories, he said that there is a tendency to reproach the psychoanalyst for degrading this great man, this great writer, when they analyze either the great writer himself or his works alone. And, in a certain sense, he adds, this reproach is entirely justified. To reveal the unconscious motivations of a work brings the author nearer to us, thereby degrading him. Freud pleads, however, for the psychoanalyst to be granted the same indulgence that is given to the biographer who, in his own way, also works towards a kind of de-idealization by way of recounting the author’s life.

Without a doubt, Lacan evinces a similar sort embarrassment when he denounces the *pedanticism*, *boorishness*, and *priggishness* typical of psychoanalysts when they get mixed up with literature and pretend to know what the author has said better than he himself does. He also denounces the literary coquetry of those psychoanalysts who *lack a spirit of invention*, and enjoins them not to “play the psychologist” — a major insult — “where the artist paves the way for him,”¹ thereby reformulating something Freud had already expressed in *Delusions and Dreams in Jensen’s Gradiva*: “In their knowledge of the mind they [writers] are far in advance of us everyday people, for they draw upon sources which we have not yet opened up for science.”²

The question for the psychoanalyst, then, is essentially one of the legitimacy of the psychoanalytic interpretation of literary works, indeed of authors themselves, in the absence of the interested party’s associations — namely, those of the author or characters in question. Again, Freud raised this question himself, and there again he responded by carrying on despite the obstacles, saying that we will *cautiously* substitute our own associations for theirs, be it those of the author or even the characters we are analyzing. The caution espoused here does not preclude the methodological audacity of such a substitution, which leads him, in particular, to never hesitate in treating characters as though they were real people. And for all of the transgressions Freud committed without hesitation in his analyses of works, authors, and characters that lack speech — Dostoyevsky and Goethe, or the characters of Ibsen, Stefan Zweig, and Hoffmann — Lacan, no matter what he may have said on the matter, did the same thing with Gide and Joyce.

Another transgression is to analyze a literary work not as an end in itself but as a means, which tends to put literature in the service of psychoanalysis. There is a certain dimension of sacrilege in this process of subordination, in the subservience of art, inasmuch as art is perhaps all that remains for us of the sacred. Yet, Freud and Lacan both say — or, at least, practice as if — literature can confirm or verify psychoanalytic discoveries. As Freud puts it, “We probably draw from the same source and work upon the same object, each of us by another method. And the agreement of our results seems to guarantee that we have both worked correctly.”³ This is Freud’s contention about Jensen, who manages to discover the laws of the unconscious and dream formation, as well as the nature of transference, the delusion, and interpretation — all without having the slightest idea about what psychoanalysis is. It is all a kind of unconscious knowledge, which he then puts to work in the *Gradiva*. Lacan notes, for his part, “the practice of the letter converges with the workings of the unconscious.”⁴

This manner of employing literature in the service of psychoanalysis serves to verify psychoanalytic discoveries, but it also helps to free psychoanalysis from medicine by demonstrating its possible extension to domains other than the treatment of neuroses. For Lacan, in particular, it will be a matter of using literature to free psychoanalysis from psychology.

Literature helps Lacan to *illustrate* — I employ a term that he himself uses — structural points, especially in the clinical structures. It possesses an instructional value, which he often employs for the benefit of his audience. In a quick survey, examples abound: on Prince Hamlet, for example, he says, “This something wherein the position of desire is organized can help us to consolidate the elaboration of the castration complex”;⁵ or, on “The Purloined Letter,” “This is why I have decided to illustrate for you today [...] the major determination the subject receives from the itinerary of a signifier”;⁶ or, on Claudel, “I tried to see if there were not something in our contemporary experience wherein what I am trying to show you might take hold.”⁷ Essentially, literature allows Lacan to read his mathemes, to translate them, as though he were proceeding from one type of writing to another, from the writing of mathemes to literary writing, and conversely — that is, he makes the one play off of the relation to the other. Nevertheless, it is not a matter of arriving at an understanding of either the literary work or the mathemes. We are rather witnesses to the passage from one writing to another, to a game between two writings, which short-circuits understanding because it is attached only to the structure.

To be perfectly honest, it has been a long time since I have carefully considered the things that I have just summarized. The imprudence of the psychoanalyst who simply will not allow herself to be stopped, who presses on by all available means, and the fact that neither transgression nor desacralization scares her — all of this is simply a fact and, moreover, I do not typically worry myself about it beyond this. So, then, why this embarrassment — I return, here, to my initial embarrassment — and the self-censorship attested to in this idea that I do not have anything to say? Does it suffice to complete the phrase thusly: I have nothing to say...that I do not already know? Certainly, there is an element of this involved. However, earlier I mentioned something of a redoubled transgression; it has to do with Lacan’s relation to literature. It just so happens that Lacan, too, belongs among the ranks of those great men, and there is certainly some manner of transgression in putting myself in the position of interrogating the relation of Lacan’s desire to literature — a transgression, at least insofar as Lacan himself is in a transgressive position.

On this point, I offer up the association that came to me in connection with this *having nothing to say*. An association is something that falls: in German it is *Einfall*, so it falls on or befalls you. The association that came to me is a memory, a memory from the first days of my analysis with Lacan. I was on Christmas vacation in my family’s hometown, the city of Besançon, where there is a lovely museum. And, in this museum, there is a painting I was particularly fond of — a Bellini depicting the drunkenness of Noah — and I made it a point to visit it during these Christmas vacations. Noah is lying half-nude in front of his sons. Two of them are laughing, while another is covering him up with his mantle in order to veil his nudity. I had purchased the post card reproduction of this painting, and I was getting ready to send it to Lacan.

And then I stopped in my tracks; I did not see my movement through to the end. As for what stopped me, I believe there were two factors. First, Lacan might have taken it to be himself on the postcard, as if there were an allusion to his advanced age — or, at least, what for me at the time was his advanced age — in the illustration of Noah. Second, there was also the fear of exposing myself with this dispatch. In short, it was a typical resistance; I did not send the postcard, and I did not even speak about it to Lacan in the course of our later sessions.

What strikes me today about this unaccomplished act — not failed, but unaccomplished — is that, at bottom, this dispatch could have signified something that was simultaneously my desire that the father be uncovered and my demand that, above all, he not be uncovered. Something from my infantile history was inscribed in this relation to the exposure of the father's nudity — that is, the exposure of his desire or *jouissance* — something in a very precocious manner I had been led to witness that, beyond appearances, constituted someone's desire or *jouissance*. This someone was my grandfather, and it was precisely in Besançon that this revelation had been made to me. So that takes care of this little fragment of analysis. But the result of this memory that came back to me, that fell upon me, immediately pointed me to my topic for the present work. I chose to follow the path of greatest resistance, which pointed towards this laying bare (*mise à nu*), which in turn led me straight to a text that Lacan devoted to this topic through a commentary on Marguerite Duras' *The Ravishing of Lol Stein*. And, what is more, this text is constructed around a redoubling.

It is a well-known book. Everyone knows the story of this young woman, Lol V. Stein, who goes to a ball with her fiancé, Michael Richardson, and sees him delighted by another woman, Anne-Marie Stretter, who only just appears on the scene. They dance together all night, right in front of her eyes, and at daybreak they run off together, leaving her alone. Duras describes Anne-Marie Stretter in the following way: "Nothing more could ever happen to that woman, Tatiana thought, nothing more, nothing. Except her death, she thought."⁸ One could say that this is something that situates Anne-Marie Stretter "between two deaths," an interval that comes up frequently when it is an issue of the relation between Lacan and literature. What also characterizes her, and what Lacan picks up on, is the non-gaze (*non-regard*) she casts over the ball, as well as her black dress. Left behind by the departing couple, Lol V. Stein is subsequently described as having been plunged into a sort of radical absence, and it is in this state of absence that she marries, has children, spends ten years in a place called U. Bridge, and then later returns to S. Thala. This absence is not situated on the side of suffering. Duras tells us that "suffering had failed to find any chink in her armor through which to slip" (9). The theme of suffering is taken up again at the end of the story, when it is compared to a sort of *grease*. Lol is unscathed by this grease. If there is suffering, we are told, it is a suffering without subject, which reflects the fact that as a child, Lol was often already situated in this elsewhere, this state of absence. Duras also evokes something in the order of incompleteness and non-fulfillment. It is not so much a matter of an incomplete process of mourning; rather, it is something else that is left in suspension during that initial scene, which we could call the primal scene.

Upon her return to S. Thala, we are told, Lol sets herself to the task of seeking this elsewhere during long walks through the city. As Duras writes, “Each day Lol goes ahead with the task of reconstructing that moment” (37) — namely, the moment at the end of the night when she was left alone by the departing couple. “What she is reconstructing,” Duras adds, “is the end of the world. She sees herself — and this is what she really believes — in the same place, at the end, always, in the center of a triangular construction of which dawn, and the two of them, are the eternal sides” (37). At this precise moment, when she is left behind, “some attempt — but what? — should have been made which was not” (37). She is missing a word that could have joined her to the couple; lacking this word, she is silent: “It would have been an absence-word, a hole-word, whose center would have been hollowed out into a hole, the kind of hole in which all other words would have been buried” (38). There is something here that calls to mind a sort of primary repression. Duras formulates this absence as follows: “She was absent from the place where this gesture occurred [the gesture of stripping Anne-Marie Stretter bare, which is precisely what was left in suspension]. [...] She was born to witness it. Others are born to die. [...] Lol had never been able to carry this divesting of Anne-Marie Stretter’s dress in slow-motion, this velvet annihilation of her own person, to its conclusion” (39-40).

There is something else worth noting in this same passage, something very striking, which involves a substitution: “The tall, thin body of the other woman would have appeared little by little. And, in a strictly parallel and reverse progression, Lol would have been replaced by her in the affection of the man from Town Beach. Replaced by that woman, unto her very breath. Lol holds her breath as this woman’s body appears to this man, her own fades, fades, voluptuous pleasure, from the world” (40). This laying bare becomes, in Duras’ own terms, “her only task.” During her walks through S. Thala, she runs into a man whom she notices on account of the way he looks at women: “Now she sees their surreptitious looks directed at her [the man’s look, but also men in general, insofar as they look at women], in an absolute equivalence. She, who does not see herself, is thus seen, in others. Therein lies the omnipotence of this substance whereof she is made, without any particular ties” (45). These looks are directed at her before other women and become the substance from which she is made, *without any particular ties* — meaning with the erratic aspect of the gaze that has the property of being detached from the body.

The equivalence of looks here is also the equivalence of one woman with another, which allows for a substitution. The man she encounters looking at women on the street meets with someone who turns out to be Lol’s old friend, Tatiana Karl, who was present at the scene of the ball. Tatiana and this man go to the *Hôtel du Bois*, which is a lovers’ retreat, and Lol goes to lie in a nearby field of rye in order to gaze at the windows of the lovers’ room. As Duras writes, “if she were asked, she would simply say that she was resting. From the fatigue of getting there” (53). *There*, at the end of her journey. At the end of her journey and yet not entirely, because she must, as Duras says, construct a *perspective*. Lol is here in the process of constructing such a perspective; she is fitting out a particular space in which she must subsequently be included by that man she encounters on the street — Jacques Hold, who turns out to be the narrator of the story. Indeed, he agrees to include her in the circuit of denuding that he is carrying out with Tatiana Karl in

their room. Lol will snare his cooperation with the words “naked beneath her black hair” — this is what she asks of him, this is what she demands. She seeks to capture the moment of her absolute self-effacement in the words “naked beneath her black hair” (108), in order that she might feel, as Duras says, “as excluded as she wished to be” (113). Indeed, she desires to experience the precise instant of her own oblivion. Hence, she will live and relive that moment countless times, always in the same rye field. Duras places the phrase “naked beneath her black hair” outside of meaning; it punctures meaning, and it is as empty as the void in Tatiana. She puts it in these terms: “the void is Tatiana naked beneath her black hair” (106).

Lacan’s “Hommage fait à Marguerite Duras du ravissement de Lol V. Stein” is a singular text in his oeuvre.⁹ Duras is the only female writer, and the sole living author, upon whose work he commented. Moreover, this is a text in which Lacan inserts himself in his own commentary, even in the title itself. The effect of this insertion is that he situates himself in a manner that corresponds to what he says about the psychoanalytic cure: It is a question of a narrative that would, in and of itself, be the site of the encounter at stake in the narrative. And this is essentially the structure of Lacan’s text: It is the site of the encounter that is at stake in the text itself. It is also the structure of the analytic cure, inasmuch as, unlike psychotherapies and those therapies based on suggestion, it includes the analyst’s desire as essential to the process and supposes that the analyst knows what is in the order of that desire. Lacan places this structure in relation to a topological figure called the “inner eight,” which he uses to illustrate the connection between the statement and the enunciation. In this statement-enunciation relationship, the statement is something that is deciphered, but the enunciation — the dimension involved in transference, where there is an articulation of two desires — cannot be deciphered. Instead, it is worked out. I will advance, now, something in the order of an attempt to work out Lacan’s point of enunciation within this text. And this is where I take some risks, because what I will propose will be quite insufficiently argued. It is something that came to me more along the lines of an association. And as Freud authorizes me to do in such circumstances, I have inserted my own associations in the place of Lacan’s.

Lacan explicitly indicates the fact that he is inserting himself within the text when he evokes the concept of *ternary structures*. Essentially, he says that we are dealing with three ternary structures, with the first consisting of Lol V. Stein, Michael Richardson, and Anne-Marie Stretter. To the extent that these three are knotted together, that knot is untied, and untied prematurely. This is what constitutes the traumatic character of what I called Lol’s primal scene. The second ternary is formed by Lol V. Stein, Jacques Hold, and Tatiana Karl. And the third is composed of Jacques Lacan (provoked, in a way, by the Jacques of Jacques Hold), Duras’ book, and Duras herself (as both the living person and the author). At any rate, that is what Lacan affirms: “This allows me to introduce Marguerite Duras here, having moreover her consent to do so, in a third ternary, of which one of the terms is *The Ravishing of Lol Stein*, caught as an object in her own knot, and in which I myself am the third person, there to introduce a ravishing, and in my case, a decidedly subjective one.”¹⁰ Much could be said about this knot, especially because it is a *knot-à-trois*, which prefigures the Borromean knot Lacan uses extensively a few years later.

But let us note simply that none of these ternary structures reduplicates the preceding one. I am particularly interested in the third ternary, and that is why I would like to briefly discuss the concept of homage. What is homage? It is a feudal term, the promise of a vassal's fidelity and allegiance to a lord. Later, it took on a courtly sense, first in relation to the Lady, and subsequently in relation to women. One also speaks of paying homage for a thing (*rendre homage d'une chose*), in the sense of paying tribute for something by returning its yield to the person to whom it is owed. Indeed, the psychoanalyst here is recognizing his indebtedness to the writer, who paved the way for him.

There is also another sense of homage, which is important for our analysis here: *to pay homage to someone with a thing*, that is, *to make an offering*. Indeed, everything will hinge on this question of the offering. Even though the homage managed to become a literary genre in itself, it remained equally at stake in the texts of other literary genres. Lacan declares that his text "is not a madrigal," and yet, there is something of a madrigal there. A madrigal, according to the *Littré* dictionary, is a short lyric poem, typically erotic and epigrammatic, which is characterized by three rhymes alternating in a varied order, and therefore it too is located in the ternary register. It is worth noting that the epigram, too, leads us back to the concept of the offering, since it originally designated what was inscribed on the objects of an offering to the gods. Afterwards, it came to mean a little composition whose chief merits are its linguistic wit and polish. We can certainly recognize this manner of concision in Lacan's text.

I propose that, in his text, Lacan is engaged in laying bare the text of *Lol Stein*, a laying bare that redoubles the one carried out by Duras; it is a laying bare that is at once the laying bare of an object and a fantasy. Lacan points straight to this object when he poses the following question: What happens to Lol? What happens to her is that she is ravished. She is ravished, robbed of her self-image in that first scene when her fiancé is taken away from her. The self-image is that "in which the other lovingly dresses you and in which you are dressed, and which, when you are robbed of it [robbed (*dérobée*), here, is certainly connected to the necessary removal of the dress (*robe*)], [it] lets you be just what underneath?"¹¹ What, then, is underneath the narcissistic image, underneath this thing that you are wrapped up in? According to Lacan, what is underneath, for Lol V. Stein, is a specific object, the gaze as object *a*. Addressing himself to Lol in his customary prosopopeia, Lacan formulates things thusly: "you were, yes, for one night until dawn, when something in that place gave way, the center of attention. [...] The center is not the same on all surfaces [...] on a complex surface, this can produce a strange knot. This last knot is ours. Because you sense that all this has to do with an envelope having neither an inside nor an outside, and in the seam of its center every gaze turns back into your own."¹² The topological figure described here, which could be the cross-cap or the Klein bottle, serves as Lacan's support for the obscure object of desire he isolates — which is, precisely, a non-specular object. In Duras' text, moreover, we find this same absence of specularity when Lol is in the rye field and she sees, in the frame of the hotel window, a "mirror which reflects nothing." This echoes what Lacan says in his seminar *The Object of Psychoanalysis*: "When the object *a* appears, if there is a mirror, nothing is reflected in it."¹³ We are confronted, in this manner, with a topological structure wherein the opposition between inside and outside breaks down, since it

corresponds essentially to the aforementioned object, the gaze. Indeed, the gaze both belongs to the body and is exterior to it, rendering the opposition between internal and external null and void. It belongs to neither the subject nor the other. It is both of the body and out-of-body. In short, it possesses the same striking characteristic of extimacy that Lacan attributes to the Thing.

So, in the end, what exactly happens to Lol? What leaves her behind in this elsewhere, this absence or anesthetic haze? Robbed of her image, she finds herself without a narcissistic envelope. But, equally important, something of the object *a* drops out, is lost, and if her being is henceforth to be found elsewhere, it is because it lies in the gaze she is unable to cast on the laying bare of Anne-Marie Stretter by Michael Richardson. As a result, her desire disappears, leaving her to fall prey to anesthetization and un-being (*désêtre*), inasmuch as something of the fantasy has given way. Lol dedicates herself to the task of reconstructing what is lost, or rather, constructing it, since it is a matter of bringing about something that never took place. This work of elaboration and construction to which she devotes herself corresponds to — or is equivalent to — the construction of the fantasy in the psychoanalytic cure. Through this construction she will be able to rediscover her desire, her very position as a desiring subject. This fantasy necessitates a *knot-à-trois*, which will allow her to recover the object-gaze and realize her being. As Lacan notes, Duras' own formulation essentially consists in the fact that “she is realized only in what happens.”¹⁴

Lacan indicates clearly that Lol is engaged in staging a fantasy that, as such, is constructed around an object. This staging completes “the passage of Tatiana’s beauty into the function of the intolerable stain which pertains to this object,” namely the gaze.¹⁵ The gaze is not the same as vision — Lacan, here, is taking up the distinction he developed previously in his seminar *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* — but it appears in the field of perception in the form a stain (*tache*). The stain is what, literally, sticks out like a sore thumb (*faire tache*) and is incompatible — this is why he calls it intolerable — with the maintenance of the narcissistic image. Due to Tatiana’s association with the function of the stain, the lovers Jacques Hold and Tatiana Karl will henceforth become disenchanting with one another and cease to be in love, since they can no longer sustain the narcissistic illusion of love. It is in Tatiana, and in laying bare the function of the stain, that Lol V. Stein reunites with her being, finding a way to realize it or, indeed, *recuperate* it — and recuperation, Lacan says, is the proper function of sublimation.

Lacan explicitly identifies Jacques Hold, given the desire linking him to two women, as occupying the place of the divided subject within the fantasy. Barred by the anxiety that Lol’s desire provokes in him, he agrees to become this desire’s servant and participate — according to Lol’s law — in this *strange mode of loving* that Lacan likens to courtly love. He compares its structure to one illustrated by a tale from Marguerite de Navarre’s *The Heptameron* — “Tale X” — which recounts the love affairs of Amador and Florida through the staging of a scene of triangulation. Amador deliberately chooses to take a wife, while simultaneously devoting his love to a Lady. Marriage and love do not unfold on the same plane, and distinguishing them from one another is a sign of *seriousness* — the same seriousness to which Lacan pays homage and which is found in both Duras’ and Navarre’s texts — which is opposed to the *masquerade* of

those who would prefer not to see that the courtly convention merely parries the promiscuity of marriage. The masquerade supported by the *ideals of the Victorian happy ending* leads to the confinement of love to the pairing of a couple, the duel of relation (or the dual relation), thereby reducing it to a kind of narcissistic hate-loving (*hainamoration*). These ideals prove to be powerless to resolve the impasses of the relations between the sexes, which it is the proper function of fantasy to overcome. We could say that the fantasy here, the *knot-à-trois*, performs a function of supplementation with respect to what Lacan will later call the absence of the sexual relationship. But we could just as well say that it reveals the nature of the obstacle to this relation. The fantasy effectively betrays the fact that, in desire, the subject never has a relation with the other of the opposite sex; the subject only has a relation to the partial object, the object *a*. And this relation between desire and the partial object means, in a certain sense, that one can only ever attain the partner of the opposite sex through the partial object — one can never reach the partner as such. This is the sense in which there is no relation between man and woman.

I would now like to address what Lacan does not actually talk about, an underlying concept that he indicates rhetorically in the form of a negation, which is the term “neurosis.” It would be boorish, he says, to attribute Duras’ text to neurosis. But, all the same, what Lacan develops about hysteria coincides perfectly with the fantasy deployed by Duras. Recall that Lacan quite frequently emphasizes the fact that the hysteric asks the question of her own femininity through the proxy of a man’s desire for another woman. In the structure of hysteria, it is absolutely fundamental that she be in some way replaced by another woman in the desire of a man. In Lacan’s formulation, it will only be through this identification with a man that the hysteric tries to answer the question of what a woman is: “This is how the hysteric comes to know herself in the homage paid to another woman, and offers up the woman in whom she adores her own mystery to the man whose role she takes without being able to enjoy it.”¹⁶ In the Durasian fantasy, the woman’s being reveals itself in desire and essentially amounts to that blind spot that takes the place of a lack in being (*Woman does not exist*). The point here is not to reduce Duras’ elaboration to some sort of neurotic problematic but, on the contrary, to point out that she lends this problematic credibility.

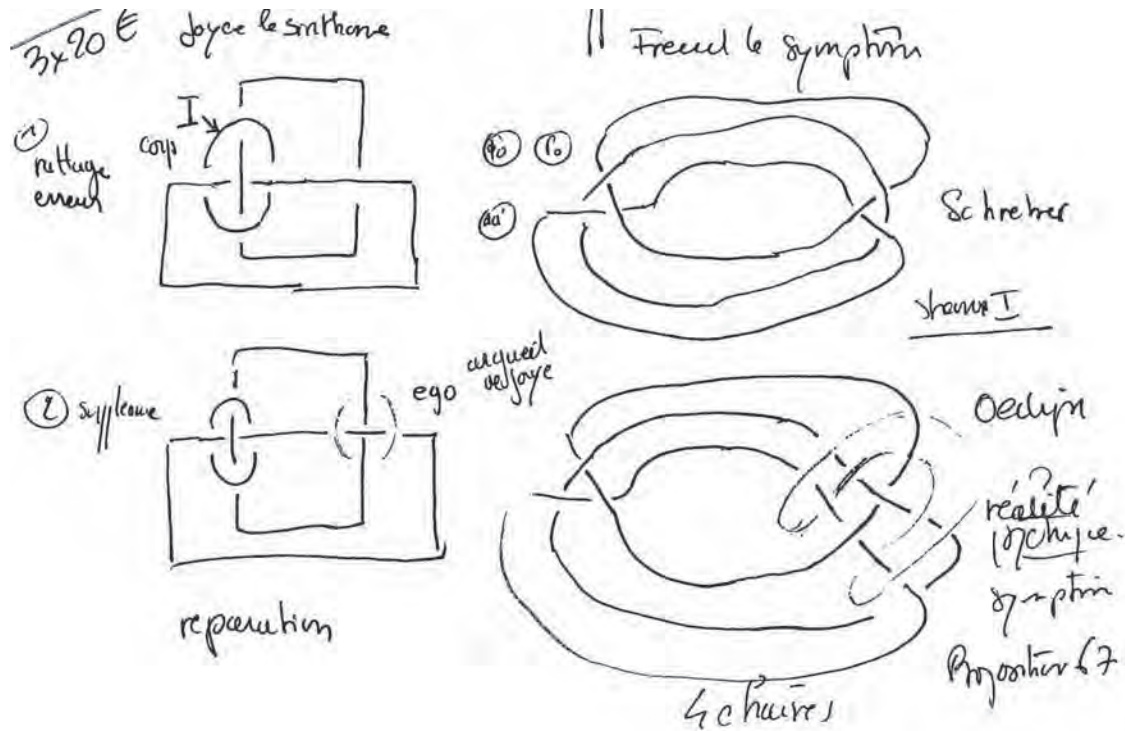
But the Lacanian clinic casts another new light on Duras’ text. Jacques Hold does not assume his position as servant of Lol’s desire within the fantasmatic ternary without also introducing his own desire, which thereby betrays the sliding of offering into sacrifice at the same time as it permutes all of the positions. Lacan adds a Sadean touch to his commentary, which indicates a sliding from *offering* to a kind of *leaving to the mercy of*. It is at this point that we see the bringing together — at least, this is what I am trying to argue — of the hysterical fantasy and the fundamental fantasy of the obsessional, such as Lacan describes it in the seminar on transference. In the fundamental fantasy, he tells us, “the other has to be, as such, handed over to a third in order to be constituted as sexual,” because the subject does not know “what he most desires from this other or from the intervening third party.”¹⁷ In this scenario, the subject comes to find the truth of his being in his own elimination.

The chiasm of fantasies here would function as a form of supplementation for the sexual relationship. The hysterical fantasy of offering another woman to a man — that is, to be replaced by another woman in the eyes of a man — is knotted together with the obsessional fantasy of leaving one woman to the mercy of another, at the risk her own elimination.

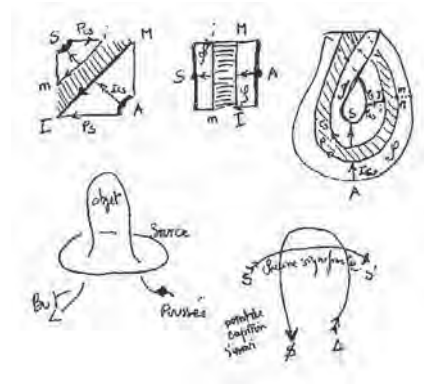
By virtue of inserting himself into the ternary structure, Jacques — Hold, or to the second degree, Lacan — substitutes one offering for another, one fantasy for another. Two fantasies slide right into the same *knot-à-trois*, despite the fact that they have neither the same meaning nor the same object or jouissance.

Is it Lacan who effects this sliding from the one to the other, or has Duras already done so? In either case, I initially began with the sliding of Noah's mantle, and I propose that we are able to see its equivalent here in the sliding of fantasies.

Translated by Michael Stanish



1. Jacques Lacan, "Homage to Marguerite Duras, on *Le ravissement de Lol V. Stein*," in *Duras by Duras*, trans. Peter Connor (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1987), 124.
2. Sigmund Freud, *Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's Gradiva*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (hereafter *S.E.*), ed. and trans. James Strachey et al. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), 9:8.
3. *Ibid.*, 9:92.
4. Lacan, "Homage to Marguerite Duras," in *Duras by Duras*, 124.
5. Lacan, *Le désir et son interprétation* (1958-1959), unpublished seminar, 4 March 1959.
6. Lacan, "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter,'" in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 7.
7. Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre VIII: Le transfert, 1960-1961*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1991), 316.
8. Marguerite Duras, *The Ravishing of Lol Stein*, trans. Richard Seaver (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 6. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically within the text.
9. "Hommage fait à Marguerite Duras" was first published in *Cahiers Renaud-Barrault* in December 1965 and then republished in *Autres écrits* in the spring of 2001. See Lacan, "Hommage fait à Marguerite Duras du ravissement de Lol V. Stein," in *Cahiers Renaud-Barrault* 52 (1965): 7-15, and *Autres écrits*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2001), 191-97.
10. Lacan, "Homage to Marguerite Duras," in *Duras by Duras*, 123; translation modified.
11. *Ibid.*, 125; translation modified.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Lacan, *L'objet de la psychanalyse* (1965-1966), unpublished seminar, 19 January 1966.
14. Lacan, "Homage to Marguerite Duras," in *Duras by Duras*, 126.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Lacan, "Psychoanalysis and Its Teaching," in *Écrits*, 377-78.
17. Lacan, *Le transfert*, 243.



PROF. DR. FREUD
WIEN, IX., BERGGASSE 19.

THE LETTER AGAINST LITERARY INTERPRETATION LACAN'S CRITIQUE OF LITERATURE

jean-michel rabaté

I.

What can the meaning of “critique” or “criticism” be for Lacan? Is Lacan to be taken as a cultural critic (as some readers of Žižek might be tempted to think), as a literary critic (as many students in the humanities see him), or as an author of countless cryptic pronouncements that, despite their obscurity, have impacted the field of literary theory, changing our very way of “doing” theory, and perhaps even obliging us to leave “criticism” aside altogether? I will begin this investigation by comparing two statements that bear on the issue of criticism, both made in seminars dating from the early seventies. In the first of these, Lacan explains that one should not analyze (that is, psychoanalyze) written texts — one should criticize them. It is revealing that, at this moment in the seminar, Lacan is engaging a critical reading of *Totem and Taboo*: He comments on Freud’s fascination with the murder of the father, from Oedipus to Moses. Freud appears in this critique as a neurotic, but his neurosis is not a hindrance so much as it is a productive agency:

It is curious that I had to wait all this time before asserting that *Totem and Taboo* is a neurotic production, which is undeniable, without jeopardizing the truth of the whole construction. This is why this work can testify to its truth. One does not psychoanalyze a work, and even less that of Freud, does one? One criticizes it, and even though a neurosis may make its solidity appear suspect, it is this same neurosis that solders it together.

The testimony given by an obsessional subject on the structure that determines him, by which sexual rapport appears as impossible to formulate in discourse, this is what we owe to Freud's myth.¹

Consistent with a life-long quarrel with anything that looked to Lacan like “applied psychoanalysis” — a dominant theme to which I will shortly return — this nonetheless leaves unexamined what exactly is meant by “criticizing.” Lacan was soon to be the object of a direct “criticism,” or of a more general “critique,” when, in 1973, Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe published *The Title of the Letter: A Reading of Lacan*. Here, indeed, was an exercise in close reading, in applying a magnifying glass to a single text — Lacan's “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud” — one that leads them, in the name of philosophical rigor and consistency, to a rather severe critique.

Lacan, who had by 1973 made several attempts to enlist philosophers to read and work with him, does not appear to have been too dismayed by this critique. He counter-attacks snidely, mixing faint praise — they have produced the best reading so far of any of his texts, one should deplore the fact that no one from his school has done the same work — with several nasty *ad hominem* digs: The two young philosophers are merely “pawns [*sous-fifres*]” in a game that opposes the camp of deconstruction to Lacanian psychoanalysis; they only write so accurately and painstakingly because they want to get “Master's degrees” that would confirm their position of spurious mastery; and they have the worst possible intentions because they “love” Lacan with a love that looks very much like hate.

His last direct allusion to their book focuses on their gloss of the Greek term *enstasis* (ἐνστασις), or “instance”:

They investigate the instance so thoroughly, so carefully [...] that they even discover the ἐνστασις, the Aristotelian logical obstacle that I had reserved for the end. It is true that they do not see where it fits in [*Il est vrai qu'ils ne voient pas le rapport*]. But they are so used to working, especially when something motivates them — the desire, for example, to obtain their Master's, a truly serendipitous term here — that they even mention that in the footnote on pages 28 and 29.

Consult Aristotle and you will know everything when I at last come to this business of the ἐνστασις. You can read, one after the other, the passage in the *Rhetoric* and the two

sections of the *Topics* that will allow you to truly know what I mean when I try to integrate my four formulas, $\exists x\Phi x$ and the rest, into Aristotle's work.²

If one turns to the incriminated footnote, one will conclude that the philosophers' remark does not warrant such a scathing dismissal. Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe merely explore all the possible meanings of "instance" (a term that, for a long time, has been wrongly translated into English as "agency"). They provide a philosophical genealogy for the term, finally tracing it back to Aristotle's use of *enstasis*: "But one will not forget that for Aristotle, ἐνστάσις, in the theory of refutation, designates the obstacle which one opposes to the reasoning of an adversary. [...] This 'agency' ['instance'] is, in particular, what the exception opposes to a universal predication. An example of this topos happens to be the following, to be appreciated according to its most 'proper' meaning: '...it is honorable in some places to sacrifice one's father, for example amongst the Triballi, but it is not honorable in an absolute sense.'³ Lacan's ire seems to have been triggered by the fact that, at a time when he was elaborating his formulas on sexuation, which rest on a logic of universals whose domain of legitimacy is limited by exceptions, the two young philosophers had, almost by chance, hit upon a powerful tool in Lacan's own appropriation of Aristotelian logic. He also seems to have appreciated their humorous example of an "exception," which looks rather like a remake of the Oedipus myth. The murder of the father should remain an exception, but it is indeed an exception that supports the rule.



Whether he felt that he had exhausted the topic of *enstasis* all at once, or thought that the concept was too obvious, already exposed and given away by the two Derridean readers, Lacan did not return to it in the seminar sessions that followed, even if Aristotle is cited there very frequently. Nancy, perhaps piqued by the accusation that he and Lacoue-Labarthe had not been able to “see the relation [*rapport*],” recently devoted an entire book to examining the Lacanian formula that “there is no [*il n’y a pas*]” sexual relation.⁴

What remains missed in this encounter between Lacanian theory and Derridean deconstruction is the fact that the “instance” in “instance of the letter” can take on a critical function. It opposes an objection, often (as Aristotle demonstrates in his *Rhetoric*) by inverting the opponent’s enthymemes (the incomplete or faulty syllogisms).⁵ Even though a critical confrontation failed to arise, we can look back to that moment in order to better understand what might be called the critical function of the letter. In this respect, it is tempting to apply to Lacan, as he reads Freud, most of the epithets he uses for Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy: He is a devoted close reader whose love for Freud is indistinguishable from hate; he is a reader who aims at something like mastery; and he is in the habit of asking untimely questions, posed either too soon or too late.

The critical function of the letter encompasses Lacan’s usual critique of applied psychoanalysis: Repeatedly arguing for the centrality of the letter and literature in psychoanalysis, he debunks anything that looks like applied psychoanalysis, especially when it is applied to the field of literature. What does he mean by “critique” then? In the last meeting of his eighteenth seminar, *D’un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*, Lacan puts his cards on the table and names Karl Marx as the true inventor of the notion of the symptom.⁶ Indeed, his insistence that one’s task is not to psychoanalyze a work but to criticize it cannot but evoke Marx’s famous eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.”⁷ And it was of course in the context of the aftermath of May ’68 that Lacan elaborated, via an articulation of Freud with Marx, his formalization of social links as discourses, wherein the “discourse of the Master” can be understood as the “discourse of the capitalist.”⁸ Lacan moves between Althusser’s influential readings of *Capital* and Foucault’s critical historicism, inserting what he called “surplus jouissance [*plus de jouir*]” — a synthesis of Freud’s *lust* and Marx’s *mehrwert* — into a new grid of discursive positions.

In his rehabilitation of the notion of the author (which followed Barthes’ announcement of the “death of the author”), Foucault explains that one at least needs authors’ names as beacons in the study of scientific discourses, thereby justifying his use of the author-function. He adds that this function is crucial when dealing with “inventors of discursivity” (or “initiators of discursive practices”), among whom Freud and Marx figure preeminently.⁹ Foucault had Lacan in mind when he stated that it was “inevitable that practitioners of such discourses must ‘return to the origin’” (134). A return to foundational texts would not simply point out lacks or gaps but transform the discursive practice governing a whole field: “A study of Galileo’s works could alter our knowledge of the history, but not the science, of mechanics; whereas,

a reexamination of the books of Freud or Marx can transform our understanding of psychoanalysis or Marxism” (135-36). Foucault’s epistemology entails that, if Marxism and psychoanalysis cannot have the status of hard sciences, it is because they are in debt to the texts of a founder, a founder whose legacy is marked both by future resemblances and future differences: “In saying that Freud founded psychoanalysis, we do not simply mean that the concept of libido or the techniques of dream analysis reappear in the writings of Karl Abraham or Melanie Klein, but that he made possible a certain number of differences with respect to his books, concepts and hypotheses, which all arise out of psychoanalytic discourse” (132).

By contrast with scientific inventors, “founders of discursivity” cannot be accused of error. Foucault writes that “there are no ‘false’ statements in the work of these initiators” (133-34). It is precisely for this reason that their theories demand a constant reactivation — they are productive because of “constructive omissions” that demand their endless reactivations. The “origin” will not be defined by truth procedures or verification, since it is porous, full of gaps and holes. The “return to ___” will not entail respectful imitation but a type of reading that is also a critical rewriting.

II.

To the question that serves as the title of Pierre Bayard’s 2004 book — *Can One Apply Literature to Psychoanalysis?* — I am tempted to respond with a simple, monosyllabic, and positive answer: “Yes!”¹⁰ One can and should apply literature to psychoanalysis, and not the other way around. It seems to me that this is how Lacan himself always proceeded. This, however, is not what Bayard has in mind with his provocative title, an ironic inversion of the pattern by which psychoanalysis has typically been applied to literature. Bayard begins by stating that his attempt to create a new school that would apply literature to psychoanalysis has failed, and then offers a postmortem diagnosis of the various types of psychoanalytic literary criticism. We tend to agree today that psychoanalytic criticism is a thing of the past, and we know that it would be very hard for a candidate to a good American graduate program to be accepted with a plan to study Hamlet’s unconscious inhibitions, or to assess the consequences of the castration complex in Dostoevsky. Indeed, the “applied” in “applied psychoanalysis” has an ironic ring to it — it calls to mind Bergson’s definition of the comic as a mechanical element *plaqué* (that is, mechanically applied) to the human.¹¹ The “application” of psychoanalysis to literature will thus generally (and rightly) be met with laughter.

While this ironic frame of mind is not dominant in Pierre Bayard’s case, he is highly critical of the ways in which psychoanalysis has been applied to literature. Surveying Sarah Kofman’s *L’enfance de l’art* and Jean Bellemin-Noël’s *Vers l’inconscient du texte*, he points out that Freud’s theory gives a dubious preeminence to creative writers. They are credited with having hit upon Freud’s concepts before he did, though any awareness of the process by which they did so is refused to them; fundamentally, they do

not know what they have found, or how they have done so. Thus creative writers need psychoanalytic discourse to make sense of their brilliant but opaque intuitions.

Bayard distinguishes between classical psychobiography (as practiced by Marie Bonaparte and Charles Mauron, for example) and psychoanalytic readings deployed without any anchoring in the writer's subjectivity or biography (Bellemin-Noël). But he does not spare Lacan in his review: "Lacan does not seem to innovate on this issue, alternating critical texts in which the author is taken into account — as for Gide or Joyce — and texts in which the readings are not founded in any privileged manner on the life of the author, as with Hamlet" (36). He adds that the manner in which Lacan invents concepts through his readings of literary works brings him closer to "applied literature" (37). Indeed, one cannot deny that Lacan was a "structuralist" with Poe, Shakespeare, Claudel, and Duras, but he ventured toward psychobiography when dealing with Gide and Joyce. I will return to this oscillation in order to assess whether Lacan was inconsistent (as Roudinesco and others believe) or whether his indifference to the inclusion or exclusion of the author's life may not send us on a different path.

Bayard's critique of both the psychobiographical and the textualist schools is that they believe in the anteriority and superiority of psychoanalysis to literature (37). They rely on a hermeneutics, on a certain art of interpretation; for them, all one has to do is disentangle meanings hidden in works. As these meanings are, by definition, partly unconscious, the author cannot know the dark forces that make the work happen. The problem, then, is that these readings produce results that only confirm an initial theory. They remain within the category of finalist readings, which deploy themselves exactly like religious readings, since what is found in the texts will be less a product of the investigation than an effect of its origins and presuppositions. This point was made forcefully by Tzvetan Tororov, whose examination of Biblical hermeneutics demonstrates that the Bible will always confirm Christian doctrine. Similarly, canonical psychoanalytical readings merely confirm the truth of psychoanalysis about the Oedipus complex, unconscious fantasies, primal scenes, and the determining role of childhood memories. This does not imply that the results will be false or the method wrong, but simply — and more damagingly — that they are entirely predictable. Such repetitiveness and predictability ended up generating only boredom and theoretical sterility.

Bayard calls instead for a literature that can be applied to psychoanalysis; he meditates on literary texts capable of reflecting psychic phenomena (48). Applied literature would focus on moments of emergence, on a new knowledge to be shared by the reader. However, he soon admits that this strategy is not likely to convince anyone; it will sway neither the psychoanalyst, who feels contested by it, nor traditional critics from other schools, who have no patience with psychoanalysis. To confirm Bayard's misgivings, I have to confess that I have not been convinced in the least by his examples. The plays and novels that he adduces (by Laclos, Proust, Maupassant, Agatha Christie, and Shakespeare) simply show that literature "thinks" by itself and that it can, unaided, stage complex psychological problems — hardly

news for teachers of literature! What do we gain from the claim that anger was faithfully depicted by Homer in *The Iliad*, at a time when psychoanalysis did not exist? An American take on this observation would tend to historicize the process and point to the links, for instance, between Madame Bovary and the invention of hysteria by French medicine, culminating in Charcot's discoveries. We can all agree that the invention of psychology proceeded parallel to certain developments in literature, just as we are ready to see in Maupassant and Stevenson convincing predecessors of Freud.

Bayard notes that literature became a field of predilection for psychoanalysis at the time of the latter's invention. Freud, Rank, Ferenczi, and others wanted to test new hypotheses by applying them to culture and, thus, synecdochically, to literature. Now that this discourse has been over-systematized, the issue is how to continue to be inventive. Bayard sees that a certain hermeneutics of the unconscious has reached the point of its exhaustion (157). He believes that the solution lies with literature, and that the future task for criticism consists of inventing new theoretical forms generated by literary models (a vague solution, to be sure). Given its riches, diversity, and subversive potentialities, literature signals the disappearance of psychoanalysis as an interpretive paradigm (164). Yet the only chance of success for applied literature would be for it to acknowledge its paranoid tendency (its wish to postulate a new and grandiose system able to replace all previous ones) and its inability to say "we." The critic must speak in the first person.

I want to express my disagreement with the drift of Bayard's argument — even if we both agree that, since what is at stake is the function of criticism facing psychoanalysis, it is literature that should be applied to psychoanalysis, not the other way round. We are left to pose the question of exactly how Lacan uses literature. Why is he so relentless in his critique of Freud's strategy of "verifying" psychoanalysis by applying it to literature, when he himself uses literature so often? Does he truly manage to consistently avoid this application? These questions are at the core of Derrida's reproach in "Le facteur de la vérité," in which he cogently accuses Lacan of reducing literary texts to mere examples that confirm a pre-established truth (such a tendency seems to have been generalized by Slavoj Žižek, whose proliferating readings continue to discover examples that prove Lacan's mathemes to be true). Addressing these questions requires yet another detour, one through the debate that opposed Lacan and Derrida in the seventies.

I will suggest that Lacan's theory of the *sinthome*, even where it flirts with psychobiography, aims at pushing psychoanalysis away from the dangers of exemplarity, that is, the reduction of textual singularity to dogmatic schemas. If a symptom is less what a patient wants to be cured of than the condensed "statement" of her or his individuality, literature, insofar as it leads to the *sinthome*, tends to disclose the element most proper to the human dimension. Joyce's writing thus offers Lacan less a field to be ploughed according to a predictable and repeatable procedure than a model of linguistic equivocation in which psychoanalysis finds a new youth.

Lacan often advances his own theses by reading Freud closely and then dramatically transforming the perspective. One can observe this process at work most revealingly when Lacan revisits Freud's central insight on Hamlet, that is, that Hamlet is a modern version of Oedipus — an older, starker, more uninhibited Oedipus. It took Lacan some close reading of Hamlet to find a snag in the usual Freudian reading, namely its dependence upon an unexamined and questionable psychology (which is yet another reason that it is insufficient to say, like Bayard, that the function of literature is to provide a parallel account of human psychology). Lacan sheds light on the dependence of Freud's Oedipal model upon a psychological reasoning that can easily be reversed:

What does the psychoanalytic tradition tell us? That everything hinges around the desire for the mother, that this desire is repressed, and that this is the cause for which the hero could not approach the act that is requested of him, namely the revenge against a man who is the current possessor, how illegitimate because a criminal, of the maternal object. If he cannot strike the person who has been pointed out for his vindication, it is because he himself has already committed the crime to be avenged. In as much as there is in the background the memory of an infantile desire for the mother, of the Oedipal desire to murder the father, Hamlet would in a sense become an accomplice of the current owner, *beatus possidens*, in his eyes. He could not attack this owner without attacking himself. Is this what they mean? — or he could not attack this possessor without reawakening in himself the old desire, felt as a guilty one, in a mechanism that makes obviously more sense.

Let us not become fascinated by such a non-dialectical scheme. Couldn't we say that everything could be reversed? If Hamlet was to jump immediately on his father-in-law, could one not say that he finds in this an opportunity to quench his guilt?¹²

In one deft thrust, Lacan punches a hole in Freud's contention that Hamlet cannot kill his uncle in revenge for his father's murder because Claudius has accomplished Hamlet's deepest incestuous wishes. This is, for Lacan, a non-dialectical argument, one that rests on an unquestioned mimetic psychology. Freud's psychologization of the main characters' "French triangle" (as Joyce would say) is founded on a common sense view, and hence it can easily be turned into its contrary. Indeed, it requires no great stretch of the imagination to suppose that Hamlet would want to punish a successful rival. Lacan addresses this notion in his studies of the mirror stage and the role of aggression in psychoanalysis. His shift from a subjective genitive (where the "mother's desire" means "desire for the mother") to an objective genitive (where the "mother's desire" is read as "her desire for another man") is a dialectical reversal that refutes mimetic psychology's assumption that one would not want to punish someone who acts out one's deepest longings. Hamlet's inhibition is thus seen to stem from his archaic desire for Gertrude, whereas the paralysis derives from his fixation on the riddle of her desire for another man, be it an uncle or a father.

In order to avoid relying non-dialectically on common sense psychology, Lacan argues, one has to pay attention to the text's recurrent signifiers, its linguistic nodal points — such as “Ophelia” and “phallus,” “foils” and “foil” — so as to dynamically connect them in a phenomenology of the desiring subject. Hamlet's false start as a desiring subject who questions the very source of desire will have to pass beyond the archaic object (the mother) to meet the phallus and death, before reaching an awareness of the place of the Other as determining desire. This complex phenomenology of stages leads, finally, to an ethics of the desiring subject.

From this we begin to understand what Lacan means when he speaks of criticism. His reading of Hamlet criticizes (and reaches a conclusion totally opposed to) Freud's, while nevertheless remaining within the discursive field that Freud opened.

III.

Lacan assigns a similar role to the critical gesture in his “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter.’” As it is well known, a salient feature of Poe's story is its logical structure, defined by a pattern of ironic repetitions. Three scenes are superposed. In the first scene, we have a “blind” King, who embodies the Law but is unaware that anything at all is happening; a “seeing” Queen, who suffers but remains impotent; and the daring Minister D—, who profits from the interaction between the first two. The Minister puts his own letter on the table and leaves with the coveted prize, knowing that the Queen cannot ask for it without awakening suspicions.

The second scene details the futile efforts of the police to retrieve the letter for the Queen. This time, the “blind” character is the Prefect of police and, by extension, his men, who cannot find the letter because they assume that it must be hidden from sight. They project their notion of what “hiding” means, never imagining that the letter could be left in full view. The “seeing” character (who cannot do much in this case) is the Minister, who basks in the imaginary security afforded by the letter's possession. The active agent here is Dupin, who identifies creatively with the Minister — who reconstructs his mental process, sees all, prepares an exact double of the stolen letter, and devises a strategy by which he will distract the Minister.

The third scene reverses the first theft. The Minister now turns into a “blind” man, while Dupin acts and, moreover, signs his substitution by quoting lines from Crébillon that will identify him as soon as the Minister decides to check the contents of the missive. Caught up in brotherly rivalry, Dupin is animated less by honor or greed than by the wish to settle an old account. He thus exposes himself to the gaze of the author, Poe or Poe's readers, including Lacan. One will have to reconstitute the tale's logic and follow its psychical economy if one is to avoid “stealing” the letter by imposing a meaning or content on it.

The force of Lacan's reading is undeniable, but it may lead to its own undermining. How can it prevent yet another turn of the screw, stop the text's triangular permutations? Such a pattern does not provide for the sort of Hegelian resolution that would bring the dialectic of blindness and vision to the point of absolute knowledge. As Barbara Johnson demonstrates masterfully, when Derrida accused Lacan of translating the contentless letter into a content, a "truth" defined by femininity and castration, it was he himself who saw too much and translated too soon, reducing Lacan's stylistic games and thus misreading a seminar no less literary than Poe's story. Derrida repeats Lacan's repudiation of applied psychoanalysis, turning it against Lacan himself: "From the outset, we recognize the classical landscape of applied psychoanalysis. Here applied to literature. Poe's text, whose status is never examined — Lacan simply calls it 'fiction' — finds itself invoked as an 'example' [...] destined to 'illustrate,' [...] 'to illustrate' here meaning to read the general law in the example, to make clear the meaning of a law or of a truth, to bring them to light in striking or exemplary fashion. The text is in the service of the truth, and of a truth that is taught, moreover."¹³

According to Derrida, psychoanalytic criticism cannot but reduce the form of a text to a teleology. Žižek answers these objections in *Enjoy your Symptom!*, showing that, at an imaginary level, a letter always reaches its destination, because whoever receives it retroactively believes (in a movement similar to Althusserian interpellation) that he or she is its addressee. On a symbolic level, the circulation of the letter itself assures that it has already reached its destination, that is, the Other, the symbolic order itself, the birthplace of all desire. This fact is underscored by an important detail, which Žižek fails to discuss: Though the Minister recognizes the handwriting of the address and infers from it the real cause of the Queen's embarrassment (he "fathoms her secret" in one gaze), we are never told the identity of the sender. We are deprived not only of the contents of the letter, but also of knowledge of the author's links to the Queen. Not only is the letter always in circulation, but it is also, in fact, a textual impossibility that it be returned to its secret sender. The "instance of the letter" at work in Poe's tale does not entail an ideality of a closed economy, as Derrida contends, but it guarantees that the workings of language displace identities thanks to the constant sliding of the signifier. In the end, as Žižek states, the third "destination" of the letter can only be death, since this signifier, seemingly immortal, brings mortality to the fore. This is where Derrida and Lacan meet — where both emphasize the lethal dimension of the letter's endless self-erasure. If the letter always returns to its destination, it returns not to its sender but to its addressee, which implies that such a "destination" is already "destined." Both ends of the letter's trajectory are thus open.

The real clash between Derrida and Lacan revolves around the positioning of the process of interpretation itself — which is where a critique finds its true point of application. If Lacan fails to address the issue of the narrator of "The Purloined Letter," this failure derives from his wish to problematize the act of interpretation. The intersubjective triad interpellates Lacan as a reader, since the third repetition of the triangular pattern implies that Lacan perceives that Dupin has shifted to the imaginary position. Contrary to what Derrida states, neither in the second nor third triad does the analyst withdraw from the symbolic

circuit. The reader-as-analyst tries to inhabit the blind spot of the text, a spot that allows for a perception of the letter, not insofar as its content matters, but insofar as it moves along the chain to impact the very act of interpretation. When he sees Dupin seeing himself, Lacan effectively takes part in the mechanism of the passage of a symptom. Of course, he too will find himself implicated in imaginary delusion if he believes that he likewise possesses some secret knowledge that lies all too visibly on the surface.

Perhaps because he believed that this involved something like the ownership of a secret, or perhaps because he was jealous of such a position of analytic mastery, Derrida strove to adopt the position of the analyst who, by facilitating a repetition with a crucial difference, finds a solution to the subjective problem of interpretation. However, against his strictures, Lacan's reading of "The Purloined Letter" never fully abandons the textuality of the text, neither Poe's nor his seminar's. Lacan chooses to ignore the "scene of writing" insofar as it implies the narrator, in a deliberate effort to avoid the pitfalls of Bonaparte's psychobiographical readings. Against Bonaparte and Derrida, Lacan brackets the fact that "The Purloined Letter" was written by Poe in a given historical period with clearly identifiable literary clichés, models, and genres. These are aspects of textuality and literarity that Lacan is not interested in; the text's literality engaged him at the level of a riddle, as the tip of allegory's sunken mass.

To this Derrida opposes the undecidability and infinity of literature; literature, he argues, prevents any idealization aiming to render itself a model in the name of a preestablished truth. Lacan is a purveyor (*facteur*) of truths. However, no one can produce a reading of a text without reducing, translating, or downplaying certain of its elements. The purity of textual plenitude will always have to be sacrificed to arrive at something like a theme, structure, plot, or narrative. We must be ready to account for a certain loss, without which we would not even be able to talk about texts in general; we will, moreover, inevitably need models, examples, and conceptual handles. This need sends us all the more violently back to the question of applying anything to texts. It might be the case that whoever attacks applied psychoanalysis will end up applying it without knowing it — all the more insistently, as it will function as a symptom.

It is in the name of a more balanced critical assessment that Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe suggest in *The Title of the Letter* that, because Lacan's theories do not form a totalizing system, they avoid reductionism, idealization, and the illusion of a mastery over truth. Lacan's theses do not exploit literary examples to confirm Freud's insights, since they present themselves as literary rather than as scientific (as Freud hoped his own theories were). This implies that literature plays a more loaded role in Lacanian discourse: It inhabits the theory from the start, so as to make it tremble, vacillate, twist. Literature complicates theory's status; it sullies the mirage of a pure theory neatly fitted with well-chosen examples. In other words, it is important to distinguish an "application" from a pure "exemplification." An application imports some of the dynamism of literary devices into the theory, whereas exemplification merely seeks the confirmation of preestablished truths.

Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe conclude their critical review of Lacan's elaboration on metaphor in these terms:

It is certainly not by chance if, along with the usual meaning of the word "metaphor," Lacan also incorporates the literary genre where we seem to find it most often — namely poetry, and more precisely poetry circumscribed by two references: Hugo and surrealism. That is, the poetry that we are able to designate, in its own terms, as that of the Word — of Divine Speech or of speech — and of the "power" or "magic" of words. An entire poetics of this order and an entire poetic practice of this style indeed subtend Lacan's text, here as elsewhere, in its literary references, its peculiar stylistic effects, and finally in its theoretical articulation.¹⁴

Lacan is reluctant to found his own discourse except in a practice of reading (Freud's texts). Yet he moves strategically between a pragmatics of therapy, on the one hand, and philosophy, linguistics, rhetoric, and anthropology, on the other, which, in the end, forces him to appear as a literary theoretician, a bricoleur of theory whose conceptual borrowings create a singularly syncretic writing — less the definitive statement of a "founder" of discursivity than the textual experiments of a quester often doubled by a jester.

IV.

The rest of this essay will assess the consequences of Lacan's central contention that there is no metalanguage, that truth can never be uttered fully in a philosophical or scientific discourse buttressed upon axioms, basic definitions, and fundamental concepts. Even the "four fundamental concepts" of psychoanalysis cannot be articulated in isolation, apart from the dense tissue of Freudian texts. These concepts describe a movement, which, even if it can be stabilized at various points and in various graphs, goes on moving. Lacan staunchly refuses to sum up Freud's "basic terms" in an axiomatic vocabulary. Indeed, in order to avoid a reductive view, he demonstrates the reopening of Freud's texts, reading them as literally as possible — which often also entails reading them as literarily as possible, even against the grain of their explicit intentions. If literature is that site in which no intentional fallacy will ever obtain, and if Freud's works are in a certain sense indistinguishable from literature, Lacan then becomes a literary critic, not one who applies a knowledge to an object, but one who criticizes the illusions of mastery inherent to any subjective position.

In "Lituraterre," Lacan rejects attempts at psychobiography by literary-minded psychoanalysts, whose judgments, he claims, should not carry more weight because of their profession. This rejection is accompanied and sustained by his stress on the letter's lack of content, which distinguishes it from the signifier it carries:

My criticism, if it can be called literary, can only bear (I hope) on what makes Poe a writer when he gives us such a message about the letter. Clearly, if he does not tell this as such, this is not a defect but an all the more rigorous avowal.

Nevertheless such an elision could not be elucidated by some feature in his psychobiography [...]. No more could my own text be solved by my own psychobiography: as for instance by the wish I reiterate of being at last read correctly. For, in order to think this, one would have to develop what I say that the letter carries so as to always reach its destination.

It is sure that, as always, psychoanalysis receives from literature a less psychobiographic conception even when taking repression as its mainspring.

As for me, if I propose to psychoanalysis the idea of a letter in sufferance, it is because this shows its own failure. And here is where I bring some light: when I invoke the enlightenment, I demonstrate where it makes a hole. This is well-known in optics, and the recent physics of the photon is underpinned by it.

This is a method by which psychoanalysis might justify its intrusion better: for if literary criticism could indeed renew itself, it would be because of the presence of psychoanalysis forcing texts to measure up to it, the enigma remaining on the side of psychoanalysis.¹⁵

Lacan's refusal to reduce the meaning of a text to psychobiography is here coupled with his wish to vouchsafe literature to the domain of enigma, to leave it its cutting edge, its insistent instance. For him, literature insists in a peculiar way, above all through the fact that it is made up of holes and erasures.

This is why Lacan glosses the etymology of "literature" via the Latin root, whose plural form, *literae*, signifies "writing, epistle, literature," while *literatura*, in the singular, signifies "writing, learning, literature." The noun derives from the verb *lino*, whose significations call up "I smear," "cover," or "erase." As Freud indicates in "The Antithetical Sense of Primal Words," the oldest roots of any language contain antithetical meanings.¹⁶ Literature belongs to the category of antithesis, insofar as its roots leave us with a double-image: a hand covers a tablet with wax, and the same hand erases the tablet so that it can be free to register other signs. Finally, *literatura* brings us closer to *litus* (the act of smearing or covering a surface). *Litus*, *litoris*, in French, *littoral*: seaside, the edge of the land. "Literature" thus generates a double pun, suggesting both letters and their erasure (a pun that is more obvious in French, in which one can always hear "rature" — "erasure" or "crossing out" — in the very signifier) and the limit or border of a territory, be it sea or abyss.

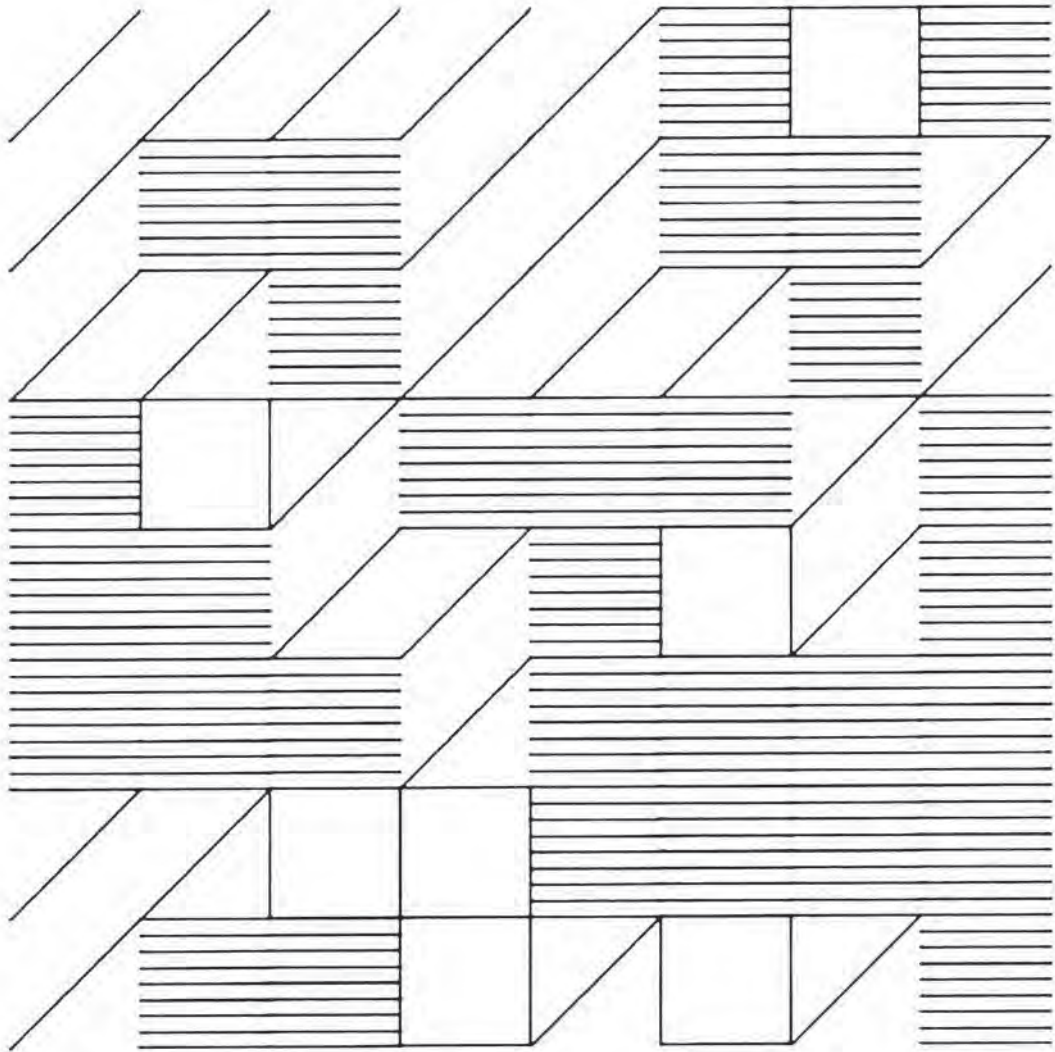
Finally, Lacan argues, such a writing appears as constitutive of the human subject and thus of sexuality as such. His text concludes with an enigmatic reference to the “it is written” underpinning the non-being of the sexual relation; this same “it is written” also refers to the transformation of knowledge into jouissance “through the edge of the hole in knowl-edge.”¹⁷ Hence, writing takes the form of a simple knot, which “has all the characteristics of writing — it could be a letter.”¹⁸ With Joyce, the letter ends up figuring the trefoil of Trinity; we are hence already in the field of the Borromean knot, whose graceful coils show without words the enigma of the sexual non-relation.

The concept of the *sinthome* was developed in Seminar XXIII with Joyce in mind. Having become more interested in thinking the real, perversion, and the jouissance of the Other, Lacan deployed the term *sinthome* to condense what he had to say about literature. One might say that the *sinthome* deposes the letter; this replacement allows him to bridge the gap between the loop of the letter and the function of psychotic discourse. Joyce was also a good pretext for him to revisit his early essay on psychotic discourse, “Les Ecrits Inspirés,” which had already shown how the letter can be inspired by, as well as addressed to, the Other. It would be too great a task to discuss Joyce at length here; there is still today a disagreement as to Joyce’s role for Lacanian psychoanalysis. Was Joyce a psychotic (like his daughter), who showed Lacan how to think psychotic discourse (as Jacques-Alain Miller and Colette Soler believe, for instance)? Or is he a writer who mimed psychotic discourse so as to confront his daughter’s disease and construct a “language of the night” (as Nestor Braunstein and Colin MacCabe think)? We need to read texts with Lacanian psychoanalysis, while avoiding its application, because this is the only way to see in literature not only our phantasmatic projections, but also a critique of life in general.

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1. Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XVIII: D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*, 1970-1971, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 2007), 161.
2. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: Encore, On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972-1973*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 69-70.
3. Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *The Title of the Letter: A Reading of Lacan*, trans. François Raffoul and David Pettigrew (Albany: The State University of New York Press, 1992), 24.
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5. See Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, in *The “Art” of Rhetoric*, ed. and trans. John Henry Freese (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 335-43.
6. Lacan, *D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*, 164.
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9. Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 113-38. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically within the text.
10. Pierre Bayard, *Peut-on appliquer la littérature à la psychanalyse?* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2004). Subsequent references will appear parenthetically within the text.
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15. Lacan, “Lituraterre,” in *Autres écrits* (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 2001), 12-13.
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18. Lacan, *Encore*, 122.



TRANSFORMATION

An interview with Pierre Klossowski
conducted by Judith Miller

Judith Miller — *Is Klossowski, l'homme aux simulacres the work of an admirer?*

Pierre Klossowski — Eight years ago, Anne-Marie Lugan-Dardigna had published a feminist book with Éditions Maspéro in which I carry the cross for all of the others: Sade, Bataille, Robbe-Grillet, and so on. But since then she has come to reconsider her initial point of view, particularly her analyses of *The Laws of Hospitality*, and one day she wrote me a deeply sympathetic letter in the hope that we might meet. We spoke, and she spent quite some time listening to me for this particular book.

J.M. — *And you respect her work?*

P.K. — Absolutely. Nevertheless, I quit writing fifteen years ago. I depict, and it would be absolutely futile to seek any relationship between my *tableaux* and my novels, save for this one: my *tableaux* already existed in my mind, as such, before I came to describe them in my novels. It is, on the contrary, the living presence of my conjugal model for Roberte — ceaselessly repeated in my pictorial compositions — that liberated me from novelistic writing. But there again, I often

tended towards an androgyny proper to the character's physiognomy to such an extent that it clearly affected my first representations of the young Ogier. But, for my pictorial work, I had the good fortune — and the rarest of fortunes — to find a model, a young man, which has completely changed my method. The fantasy always exists for a painter, especially one in similar circumstances. It is made up of vague recollections in the order of memories from junior high school, ones that have to do with the adolescent, which is my sole concern at the moment. My feelings about the text are entirely ambivalent; there is no need to say anything more about it.

THE FANTASY AND HIS MODEL

J.M. — *What is the role of this model?*

P.K. — Having this model has made things different: It is both an obstacle, a kind of corrective, and at the same time it gives rise to a whole set of projections onto the living figure of this handsome and exceptionally intelligent, young man who has agreed to pose for me. His own particular manner of accommodating kindness is serenely reflected in my recent *tableaux*. And, for this reason, they present a reality that is so... so unusual, that my painter friends are left stupefied by them. Since I began working with this external representation, which serves to confirm that reality, my craft has changed — as much in the structuring as in the intensity of hues. A good number of questions depend on the artist's temperament. People have remarked on the disproportion between my formats and the colored pencils that I am now using in my return to "anthropometric" dimensions; but as Lamarche-Vadel has underlined, colored pencils are, as a rule, only suitable for sketches or small formats.

In each of my transpositions, I choose subjects that are not narrated in my books. If the characters from the feminine *Robertienne* series came out of my books and had adventures that fit into the same general spirit, then the images of boys are of a different order.

ANDROGYNOUS FICTIONS

J.M. — *Even so, do you see a genealogy between those feminine figures and the current adolescent?*

P.K. — Certainly, but it is no longer a matter of ambiguous *angels*, but really of actual adolescents: without being a man, he is nonetheless not a woman. The ephemeral nature of a child's charm between thirteen and sixteen years old tends to dissolve the fable representing his encounter.

J.M. — *So the link between Roberte and the adolescent, then, is you?*

P.K. — Yes and no.

J.M. — *But all the same, it is your own apprehension of them that angelicizes these androgynous fictions?*

P.K. — I would like to dismiss the ridiculous discussion about the sex of angels. Ganymede is a boy, and he is not transfigured but exalted by Zeus just as he is. In *The Baphomet*, the page Ogier simply behaves like a boy of his age, ignoring all of the idolatrous hallucinations he provokes in the Templars. If one of my *tableaux* depicts the Grand Master's debates with the androgynous Baphomet as being his fantasy, then in contrast, the one showing the young page at Brother Damien's bedside is no longer on the side of the fantasmatic but on the very real side of my model — that is what I have made every effort to render.

BERNIN AND SADE'S ANGELS

J.M. — *Is it the ambiguity of the sexual identity of your feminine figures, just as with the adolescent, that makes angels out of them, that immortalizes them?*

P.K. — That was essentially the case in Baroque sculpture; look at Bernin's angels in Rome. Yet, angels are spirits, and the adolescent's ambiguity is in no way an angelic one. That sort of ambiguity was too familiar to the Roman society of the day (consider the introduction of *castrati* into the Sistine Chapel choir) for it to appear shocking to them, unlike its reception by French tastes, which were impervious to the appeal of such things.¹ Hence the drama of Sade, which paradoxically breaks with the libertinage of the day precisely because of his own abnormality: being able to treat the woman as a boy and the boy as a woman. Endowed with a rich feminine sensibility, he did not identify so much with Justine — whose misfortunes he describes as though they were his own — as with Juliette, in order to entrust her with the testing of his own philosophy: Juliette is the mental androgyne to whom he lends his own mind. As opposed to the Sadian pervert, who defines the sensible through his complete monstrosity, the Sadian heroine expresses reason. Sade is the bearer of a feminine richness; that is what I tried to describe in *The Philosopher-Villain*, which preceded my final version of *Sade My Neighbor*.

I managed, however, totally to escape from his influence as I became completely engrossed in my *tableaux*, whereas Mozart's musical-erotic chords (as Kierkegaard said) were ringing out in the silence of the image.

J.M. — *To not take sexual difference into account, to encourage the lifting of a censorship on sexual identity — isn't this one way of being an atheist?*

P.K. — Obviously, this is the case with Sade, who, precisely because of this, sees no other solution but atheism — it is a rationalization of his abnormality, as I have described in minute detail. And, incidentally,

how could I dare deny that Sade influenced me in the past, as much by his prose as by his stagings interspersed with discourse? Sade did not revive this logical language; it was a tributary of his time, but with what ferocious irony he used it!

IS JULES ROMAINS A PORNOGRAPHER?

J.M. — *Why attribute what concerns the logic of language to a specific time? Do you think that, in fiction, someone is able to be what is censored in him?*

P.K. — That is what heaven is, the liberation of what is suppressed in someone, their dueling impulses. To classify me among those supposedly pornographic painters, like Félicien Rops, is absurd. And even Félicien Rops is not a pornographer, since he paints. Or what about Jules Romains, then? Is he one? Who would dare claim to be? It is the same thing with the stagings I have done and the figures I have produced. In the end, I was writing for the blind, who saw by reading me, while those who knew how to read me did not see what I was showing them. Now no one, especially the Parisian critic, is able to forget that I once wrote, and they think they need to refer to my books to understand my *tableaux*!

J.M. — *What is it that the writer did not say, but that the painter is making visible?*

P.K. — The reading of a *tableau* is not the reading of a book. Speech, writing — they explain a series of seemingly connected facts. My *tableaux* recapture the *fait accompli* without explanation.

THE CONTEMPLATIVENESS OF THE ART LOVER

J.M. — *You don't address yourself to the same audience when you write and when you draw!*

P.K. — Exactly. There is a contemplativeness to the art lover that is entirely different from that of the reader.

J.M. — *Your drawings, are they frescoes in colored pencil?*

P.K. — That is what one would have to say. Until the new world order, such a thing didn't exist. These frescoes essentially presuppose a permanent residence. I know a few art lovers who have homes where they live with my *tableaux*. An art lover does not cram his valuables into bank vaults. He knows how to live with my *tableaux*. It is a different kind of cohabitation than that of the reader with a book.

J.M. — *A fresco isn't movable?*

P.K. — Generally speaking, my compositions are diaphanous; they are made to be on a wall in a different way than a painting, which you hang like a mirror.

J.M. — *And which you can also unhang, unlike a fresco...*

P.K. — The fresco presupposes an architecture. A painting is an object. Physically, it is like a piece of furniture, and the fresco is not a piece of furniture. In contrast, my first charcoal sketches, like *Roberte et les collégiens (Roberte and the schoolboys)*, were inspired by silent films on those big screens from fifty years ago.

J.M. — *Did your pictorial work lead to your break with writing?*

P.K. — For my own personal satisfaction, there are a number of instances in which I need to write once again in order to recover certain periods of my life, in an autobiographical sense. It truly is a need. It is in order to defend myself. People too often forget that we, my brother and I, come from a background of painters.

AN EXHIBITION IS NOT A DEMONSTRATION

J.M. — *Is your need to write responding to a desire to recapture that origin?*

P.K. — In the postface of *The Laws of Hospitality*, I explained the way that things came to me, how they emerged for me, and how that need ultimately found its full blossoming from a pictorial standpoint.

J.M. — *Nevertheless, what pleases you about drawing is the silence...*

P.K. — Which gives birth to the image. To those who ignore my pictorial work, I say *I think nothing more than what the tableau thinks*. It's asocial, as though I have fallen into a kind of insensitivity towards the other aspects of the world that surrounds me. But even so, it is a sort of communication, one whose initial egoism redeems itself by inviting the contemplator to participate in it. The painter is neither a hermit nor a loner. For me, it matters more to show what I see than it does to say it. To exhibit is perhaps a defense against the world we live in, against actuality itself, and the paucity of understanding that reigns there. Fantasy is the obsessive and restrictive fact of all those who seek to create. To say that I only paint to demonstrate my "theories" is just idiotic. An exhibition is not a demonstration. What I have said about the fantasy, the simulacrum, and the constraint to which they give expression — all of that is also true for the entire history of painting. There is a religious element to it that, in the West, has been heavily accentuated by Christianity. Generally speaking, art is in collusion with religion; everything currently being undertaken sets itself in opposition to it.

WHAT COULD BE MORE NORMAL?

J.M. — *Since you brought up Balthus, allow me to state something that is strikingly obvious for an outside “viewer” of your exhibition. One of you is fascinated by adolescent boys, and the other by adolescent girls. Do you two talk about it?*

P.K. — No, never. It isn't the same relation, and our developments have been altogether different. What could be more normal than an artist fixing his constant gaze on little girls? The same goes for Socrates' emotion at the sight of Charmides, which inspired the *Eros paidikos* — customary in his time — that Goethe said was as old as humanity itself.

J.M. — *Would you say that the adolescent boy alone is the bearer of adolescence? That there is no true adolescent girl?*

P.K. — Adolescence is a single instant which, when isolated, becomes completely fascinating. But it does not so happen that young boys, or even ephebes, simply blossom upon reaching the age of manhood, as is the case with young girls becoming women. On the feminine side, the relations between Diana and Callisto would present the opposing viewpoint. In one of my most recent series I show *Charmide submitting to Socrates' charm*, at an age when he was capable of arousing him before deceiving him. You can find a reproduction of it in *The Denunciated Enunciation (l'Énoncé dénoncé)*.²

J.M. — *Do you really denounce the enunciation? Is your own transformation in the order of a denunciation?*

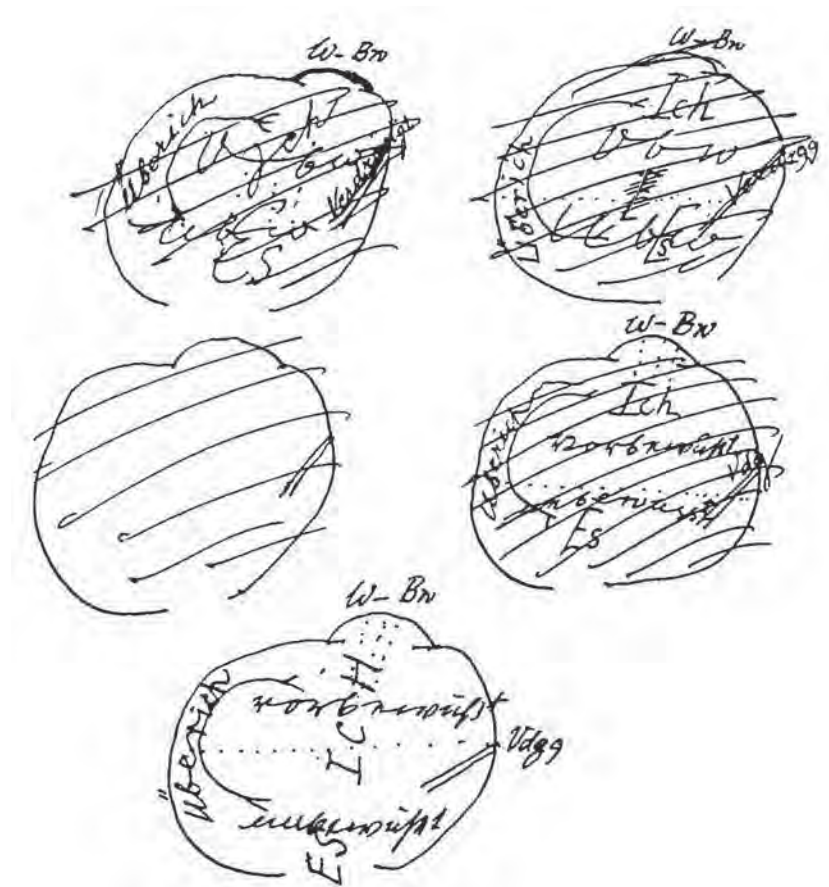
P.K. — Yes, a bit. In the very large *tableau* entitled *Au miroir révélateur*, which served as the poster for the exhibition at the Beaubourg gallery and then also in Toulouse; you cannot tell if the man is a sort of Judex. He is no priest; he is simply a very moral man. He wants to stop the adolescent from passing in front of the mirror, where they each see what is happening in their mutual apprehension.

Translated by Michael Stanish

write	wrong	
<p>write <i>v</i> his wrongs —W.L.Sullivan) as a 1 to draw up 1 DRAFT (get a lawyer to ~ your will) (< a more liberal program which might run into a presidential veto —John Hill) b (1) ; to compose in a literary form ; be the author of 1 CONSTRUCT according to literary precepts (more concerned to ~ an adventure story than to compile a careful geographical work —Geog. Jour.) (this middle eighteenth century wrote little literature —V.L.Parrington) (all the poetry that has ever been written —T.S.Eliot) (< the libretto for an opera) wrote a suitable epitaph —J.G.Colton) (2) ; to compose in musical form ; be the composer of (a commission to ~ an opera —H.T. & D.A.Schmitkind) (< a string quartet); also 1 to produce musical notation for (the guitar is sounded an octave lower than written) c ; to set forth in written language (success in literary form ; reveal, describe, treat of, or depict by means of words (the great poet, in writing himself, writes his love —T.S.Eliot) (could not ~ a claim —John McNulty),</p>	<p>books, articles, or other material for publication. (2) ; one that writes stories, scenarios, or advertising for motion pictures (3) ; a composer of music b (1) ; SCRIVENER, SCRIBE (2) ; a clerk of the East India Company (3) ; YEOMAN IF (4) ; WRITER TO THE SIGNET (2) SIGN ; LAWYER, SOLICITOR; also ; a lawyer's chief clerk d (1) ; one that writes insurance (2) ; one that accepts, records, and issues receipts for bets as agent of a numbers game e ; one that transcribes or paints lettering for signs or ornaments 2 a ; one that writes or is able to write ; PENMAN b ; BRILLEWRITER 3 ; a person engaged in writing (a number of agricultural economists, the ~ included —C.C.Mitchell) (eludes this ~'s memory —E.A. Lahey)</p> <p>writer's cramp also writer's palsy or writer's spasm <i>n</i> ; a painful spasmodic cramp of muscles of the hand or fingers brought on by excessive use in writing</p> <p>writ-er-ship \ˈrɪt-ər-ˌʃɪp\ <i>n</i> ; the position or function of a writer</p>	<p>writing ink <i>n</i> ; ink that is to be used with a pen and that may be permanent (as a blue-black ink) consisting essentially of a dispersion of gallic acid or tannin, ferrous sulfate, and often a blue dye in water or nonpermanent containing soluble dyes and including washable inks — compare INDIA INK 2</p> <p>writing master <i>n</i> ; an instructor in penmanship</p> <p>writing paper <i>n</i> ; paper intended for writing upon with ink that is usu. finished with a smooth surface and sized</p> <p>writing school <i>n</i> ; a school teaching mainly writing common till the end of the 18th century and found in frontier regions still later</p> <p>writ of assistance 1 ; a writ issued by a court of equity to a sheriff, marshal, or other law officer for the enforcement of an order or decree of the court; <i>v</i> 2 ; one used to enforce an order for the possession of lands 2 ; a writ issued to a sheriff or other officer to aid in the search for smuggled or otherwise uncustomed goods</p>

The interview published here first appeared in *L'Âne. Le Magazine freudien* 28 (October-December 1986).

1. On the other hand, however, the Romantic generation will see this issue more clearly, notably in Balzac's *Sarassine*. [Klossowski's note]
2. Bernard Lamarche-Vadel, *Klossowski, l'énoncé dénoncé* (Paris: La Galerie Beaubourg, 1985).





SIGNIFIER AND LETTER IN KIERKEGAARD AND LACAN

sigi jöttkandt

When you scribble and when I too scribble, it is always on a page with lines, and we are thus immediately enmeshed in this business of dimensions.

— Jacques Lacan¹

In Seminar XX, Lacan offers his famous definition of love as “the displacement of the negation from the ‘stops not being written’ to the ‘doesn’t stop being written’” (145). It is to this “point of suspension” — that is, the point between the contingency of the “stops not being written” and the necessity of the “doesn’t stop being written” — that, he claims, “all love is attached” (145). As it is well known, the thing to whose questionable scriptivity Lacan is referring in this formula is the sexual relationship. Lacan maintains repeatedly in his later seminars that the sexual relationship cannot be written. To the extent that it is a strict impossibility, the sexual relationship is the “sole part of the real that cannot manage to be formed from being” (48). Nevertheless, it is equally well known that something makes up for the sexual relationship’s absence (albeit always inadequately, as Lacan also constantly reminds us [45]). This something is writing itself.

Precisely what Lacan means by writing will clearly require further investigation. Closely associated with love in Lacan's later seminars, "writing" will enable a formalization to take place that is not entirely ruled by the phallic signifier. Yet, as we will also see, this is not to say that writing has nothing to do with the signifier and its regime of law. On the contrary, the bar between signifier and signified "is precisely the point at which, in every use of language, writing may be produced" (34).

We can make our way into the problem by recalling how, in Seminar XX, Lacan refers to the remarkable leap set theory makes when it posits our ability to group disparate objects together and to declare them to be One. However, more momentous than this declaration of the One, whose creation *ex nihilo* Lacan identifies throughout his teachings with the birth of modern science, is the way that set theory additionally grants us "the right to designate the resulting assemblage by a letter" (47). In very much the same way that the signifier One comes to stand in for the grouped objects in modern science's discovery, the letter in set theory performs a substitutive role. Yet, despite a certain synchronism of the two gestures, Lacan cautions, in this seminar, that the letter is of a different order than the signifier. The written, he says, "is in no way in the same register or made of the same stuff [...] as the signifier" (29). This is because, insofar as the letter constitutes an *assemblage*, it necessarily brings into play a second-order formalization or abstraction whose advance on the One of modern science can be stated as follows: With the letter comes the ability to deal simultaneously with multiple Ones.

We can understand this better if we pursue the thread Lacan dangles at the close of his lesson of 20 February 1971, when he concludes by remarking that "it is no accident that Kierkegaard discovered existence in a seducer's little love affair" (77). In what follows I propose to examine not the *Diary of a Seducer*, to which Lacan is probably referring, but another and somewhat less well-known text from *Either/Or* — the chapter on Eugene Scribe's comedy *Les premières amours*.

THE FIRST LOVE

Little introduction is needed to Kierkegaard's major work, whose conceit is outlined in the opening chapters. *Either/Or* is a collection of essays that were supposedly discovered and gathered together by the work's editor, Victor Eremita. The work is composed of two parts, the initial half authored by the aesthetic figure that Eremita calls "A," and the second by an ethical individual, Judge William, whom Eremita designates "B." *Either/Or* presents arguments by each apparent author in support of the aesthetic and ethical ways of life. In the sixth chapter, the text we will be dealing with here, A reviews Scribe's comedy *Les premières amours*. In Scribe's play, A finds a superlative expression of the aesthetic theory he has been developing throughout the work.

As we learn in his preamble to the review, Kierkegaard's aesthete holds *Les premières amours* in the highest esteem, thereby sharing the general acclaim the play received during its 131 performances in Copenhagen over the better half of the nineteenth century. Calling it "a play without a fault," a play "so perfect that it alone should make Scribe immortal,"² we soon learn that *Les premières amours* also occupies a unique place in A's own personal history, as a play he first watched in the presence of his own former sweetheart, his own "first love."

In the tradition of good French comedy, the plot is, by every standard, stupid enough: Emmeline, the only daughter of a wealthy iron-founder, is about to be married off to the young man Rinville. Brought up on an unhealthy diet of romantic novels by her Aunt Judith, Emmeline refuses to meet him, claiming that she is still in love with her childhood sweetheart, her cousin Charles, whom she last saw when she was eight. Upon intercepting a letter that informs him where Emmeline's heart really lies, Rinville decides to increase his chance of success by passing himself off as the long absent Charles. When Charles unexpectedly arrives home, already secretly married and with debts he hopes his uncle will pay, he agrees to join in the masquerade. Predictably, the comedic change of identity has its desired effect: Emmeline, on first meeting "Charles" again (really Rinville), declares her undying love for him. But, once she discovers that he no longer has the ring she gave him, she falls rapidly out of love. Emmeline's love mysteriously returns as soon as "Charles" is able to produce the token. After much hilarious confusion, their true identities are finally revealed, at which time Emmeline agrees to marry Rinville. "It was a mistake," she tells him, "I confused the past with the future" (253).

The key to the aesthete's reading of the play — what makes it, for him, a "masterpiece of dramatic perfection" — lies in this final statement of Emmeline's, which he emphatically does not take as an admission of a mistake, that is, a sign of a change in Emmeline's outlook. Indeed, it is against this "moralizing" narrative of ethical progress that his entire reading of the play is pitted. For A, there is "not the least thing discernible in the play to indicate that her choice of Rinville might be more reasonable than anything else she has done" (255). For A, "Emmeline's nature is infinite nonsense, she is quite as silly at the end as in the beginning" (255). In A's reading of the play, then, Emmeline does not marry Rinville because she suddenly realizes that she has loved him all along as the pseudo-Charles, nor does she discover the error of her maxim, learned from their Aunt Judith in the course of their literary education: "the first love is the true love and one only loves once." On the contrary, A says. If Emmeline discovers that the real Charles is not her Charles, she also discovers that Rinville is not her Charles either, leaving open the possibility that "a new figure will appear, who resembles Charles, and so forth" (256). Thus, far from ending, the play continues in an "infinite jest" about Emmeline, and her final speech must be understood in the following way: "Previously," A says, "her illusion lay behind her in the past, now she will seek it in the world and in the future, for she has not renounced the romantic Charles" (257). Emmeline's closing speech thus indicates not a change of heart but "a change of movement," and "whether she travels forward or backward, her expedition in search of the first love is comparable to the journey one undertakes in search of health which, as someone has said, is always one station ahead" (257).

The reader will not find it hard to recognize shades of the Freudian lost object in A's description of first love. The lost object, classically the mother, is permanently "one station ahead," requiring not to be found but re-found — because as soon as we believe we have reached it, we immediately discover that "that's not it!" which obliges us to begin the search anew. In the conventional reading of this Freudian narrative, the paths we trace in desire represent our attempts to recover the original blissful union with this irretrievably lost first love, the mother. I scarcely need to add that this attempt is notoriously hopeless, simply because no real object can ever match the mythical maternal ideal that, as psychoanalysis also reminds us, has no more actual existence than Emmeline's Charles. The entire ensuing trajectory of the subject as a subject of desire revolves around this originally missing object that we can only subsequently approach piecemeal, through the exigency of what Lacan calls the object *a* — the little piece of the subject that was cut loose by castration and that had to be given up in order to accede to a symbolic identity. Assuming objective form as the *unheimlich* objects Lacan identifies as the voice, the gaze, the feces, and the breast, the principal feature of the object *a* lies in the way it continually slips from the subject's grasp.³ The moment this infinitely desired object is reached, it immediately divests itself of its magical qualities, which are transferred over onto another, now desired, object *ad infinitum*, in what Lacan calls the "metonymy" of desire. Psychoanalytically speaking, we are all Emmelines, "spirits of the ring": We are all held in thrall by some nonsensical little nullity, literally a nothing, that we chase after. We obey — that is, fall in love with — anyone along the way who is regarded "as hav[ing] the ring in his hand" (269).

The only problem with this Freudian story, of course, is that it is not true. Like Emmeline's enchanted vision of the love she and Charles shared as eight-year-olds, the experience of unity with the mother never happened; it is a myth. Yet, like the other famous psychoanalytic "myth" (that of the primal "father of enjoyment" from *Totem and Taboo*), the fact that it has no empirical reality does not mean that it has no "truth." For psychoanalysis, which famously distinguishes between truth and knowledge, the lack of a basis in physical reality has never stopped one from claiming that something — say, a hysterical symptom — possesses truth.⁴

So let us take Emmeline's motto as our starting point: "the first love is the true love and one only loves once." On an initial reading, it appears both categorical and irrevocable. You have only one chance in your life, it seems to say, to really love someone, and the first person you love is the only one you will ever really love. Nevertheless, as we learn in the preamble, in which A tells the story of his own "first love," the "first" turns out to be a rather slippery category in practice. In his lead-up to his review of Scribe, A tells the story of how, upon meeting his former sweetheart again — the same one with whom he had first attended a performance of *Les premières amours* — he finds her telling exactly the same story as Emmeline. Seeing A again after many years, his former lover "assured [him] that she had never loved [him], but that her betrothed was her first love, and that 'only the first love is the true love'" (242). For A's former lover, the first love is apparently a qualitative category, and one that allows for a certain (convenient) revisionism in one's personal history.

Such a qualitative first, however, is assuredly not what Emmeline has in mind. Nor would it make *Les premières amours*, in A's estimation, a play that is "infinitely comic" (253) and Emmeline's character one of "infinite nonsense" (255). From A's former lover's "sophistical" approach, Emmeline would, on the contrary, recoil in horror. As A explains,

When a widower and a widow join fortunes, and each one brings five children along, then they still assure each other on their wedding day that this love is their first love. Emmeline in her romantic orthodoxy would look upon such a connection with aversion; it would be to her a mendacious abomination, which would be as loathsome to her as a marriage between a monk and a nun was to the Middle Ages. (252)

Emmeline, by contrast, "holds fast to her proposition numerically understood" (252), which A goes on to qualify in the following way: "She loves [Charles] with an objective, *mathematical* love" (253; emphasis added). Clearly, the manner in which we understand this "mathematical" love will decide whether the wit of Scribe's play stands or falls, for, as A puts it, Emmeline "must now acquire experience and the experience refutes her. [...] It appears that she loves Rinville" (253). To determine whether the play is "infinitely comic, or finitely moralizing" (253), the validity of Emmeline's maxim must be put to the test.

The irony of the play lies, of course, in the statement's patent falsity, for not only does Emmeline love more than once (first Charles and then Rinville), at another level she has never loved at all: To the extent that she refuses to give up her "illusion" of Charles, Emmeline's first love is "always one station ahead" (257). How, then, can she claim to love only once? The only meaningful answer is that Emmeline's statement refers not to any actual or imagined loved object but to the manner, the way in which Emmeline loves. For psychoanalysis, it is perfectly reasonable to say that one "only loves once," even if one can rattle off a reel of past lovers, each of whom enjoyed the genuine privilege of being the "first" and "true" love. However, the Freudian first love differs markedly from A's former sweetheart's revisionist notion of first love, for the psychoanalytic formula holds just as true even if one has yet to find one's "true love." What psychoanalysis refers to here, in other words, is an original choice, expressed by the Freudian term *Neurosenwahl* (the choice of neurosis). This is the choice we carry with us throughout our loving history that directs the "stage" on which our subjective drama will be performed, whether neurotic, perverse, or psychotic. In this sense, to say "one loves only once" is to say that we are capable of only one desiring scenario, one fundamental fantasy that organizes the multiple encounters (real and imagined) of our love lives and that itself *never changes*. The fantasy is what guarantees that, beyond all of their infinite variety or superficial differences, each of our lovers is at some unconscious level the same, a partner in a specific pattern of desire that, chosen once and once only, cannot be undone.⁵

This should become clearer if we look more closely at the ways Emmeline and Charles "love only once." Emmeline, as we saw, is perpetually in search of the "first love" as an event that is infinitely to

come. No single lover matches up with her vision of the “romantic Charles” that, the aesthete never stops reminding us, is an “illusion.” As it turns out, Charles, too, is in the grip of an illusion, insofar as he had the same “romantic training” as Emmeline. However, unlike his cousin, who is “hidden from [her]self,” as A puts it, Charles believes he can hide from others. Charles’s belief in his own powers of mystification, A tells us, “is just as fantastic as Emmeline’s illusion, and one recognizes Judith’s schooling in both” (249).

In these two eager readers of romantic novels we find a remarkable illustration of two different ways a lover can miss the “first” love. Eternally in search of her One, Emmeline must always begin her quest for Charles anew, since each time she finds him he will fail to be “Charles.” More acquainted with the “pinch of reality” (248), Charles, on the other hand, has already expended his illusion and, having become “a dissolute fellow” (247), finds himself tricked into marriage by a woman more well-versed in mystification than he. Not one to admit defeat, Charles will employ any number of disguises to obtain his goal — as A puts it, “he knows that there are five or six ways whereby one can move an uncle’s heart” — and, if the first is unsuccessful, he will try on another, and then another, in an infinite display of confidence in his ability “not to be recognized” (248).

Thus, while both Emmeline’s and Charles’s different attempts to obtain first love inevitably fail, what is of interest is the way each of these failures generates its own unique form of infinity. It is not hard to see how the infinity produced by Emmeline’s failure corresponds to the infinity found in Zeno’s paradox of Achilles and the tortoise. Racing each other, Achilles permits the tortoise a head start, only to discover that he can never catch up with her since, in the time he covers the distance the tortoise has already traveled, the tortoise will have “run” farther ahead. To make up the time, Achilles must then cover the new distance, at which point the tortoise will have advanced further still. Like Emmeline, who will always be either behind or ahead of “Charles,” Achilles can only pass or leapfrog the tortoise, as Lacan explains in his commentary on this paradox (8).

With Charles, on the other hand, we enter the infinity corresponding to Zeno’s other paradox — that of the arrow in motion. The paradox here is Zeno’s proof of motion’s “impossibility”: The arrow will never “move” since it can be eternally divided into ever-smaller units of measurement. If Emmeline’s first love lies forever in the future, Charles’s first love is always already in the past — as a married man, he has already found his “One” (Paméla). Yet, as a master of disguise himself, he can never really be certain of the very “first” One, that is, whether he is not still being taken in by Paméla or Rinvillie or, indeed, even by Emmeline. Like the arrow, Charles’s “count” is strictly speaking immobile — he can never get to Two because he can never decide where the “One” really began.

In a pleasing symmetry, these two forms of failure, and the two corresponding infinities they generate, can be illustrated using the formulas of hysterical and obsessional fantasies:

Hysterical fantasy: $\frac{a}{\phi} \diamond A$
 Obsessional fantasy: $\mathbb{A} \diamond \phi (a' a'' a''' \dots)$

The first formula, that of the hysterical fantasy, depicts a strategy for covering over one's own intrinsic lack ($-\phi$) by way of an identification with what one believes the Other desires (a). When this identification fails, as of course it always will for the Emmelines of the world, this is not so much because "Charles" does not match up to her illusion of him — although this is typically regarded as the source of the hysteric's constitutive disappointment in the master. But, as A continually reminds us, Emmeline fundamentally does not *know* Charles, thus how could she know what to match him against? Hence, when Emmeline becomes convinced that "Charles" is not "Charles," we must conclude that her conviction does not derive from any change in Charles's real or imagined characteristics; instead, it derives from the fact that at some level he has failed to recognize *her*. A explains how Emmeline "does not seek the alteration in the fact that Charles has become a spendthrift or possibly something even worse, but in that he has not confided everything to her, as he was accustomed to do" (268). It is this, rather than any failure to match up to an ideal, that convinces the hysteric that "Charles" is "not the same anymore" (267). Read in this way, Kierkegaard offers an intriguing new slant to the hysteric's eternal question to the master, "what [or who] am I?"⁶ Here we see that the hysteric knows very well who *she* is — the question is whether the master also knows, and when it becomes apparent that he does not, she re-embarks on her quest for a new One, a master who *truly* knows and recognizes who she is.

A different objective drives the obsessional fantasy, which in this case is not propelled by the subject's lack. The obsessional, famously, does not feel he lacks anything. It is, on the contrary, precisely because he feels he satisfies the Other all too well that he is led in his fantasy to emphasize the lack in the Other (\mathbb{A}). Accordingly, the obsessional's entire fantasmatic scenario is designed to keep the Other in a state of desire, which he employs as a defense against the threat of being entirely swallowed up by the (m)Other. Thus, like Charles, the obsessional becomes an expert in mystification. The obsessional generates a proliferating series of substitutive objects — the traditional obsessional behaviors or "disguises" that are intended to keep the Other (in Charles' case, his uncle and Emmeline) occupied while preserving his real identity (as a married man) beyond the Other's reach. These "disguises" are what is expressed in the formula as the little a s, semblances of the semblance that the obsessional, as the Other's a , attempts to hide behind. Naturally, however, what the obsessional fails to realize is that, like Charles, it is he who is the most taken in by his disguises. As A puts it, Charles "believes it is he who contrives intrigues, he who mystifies, and yet the spectator sees that the mystification was in operation before Charles appears" (259). In imagining that he is the puppet master generating the illusion, the obsessional in fact "give[s] the whole thing away" (260).

What is the point of these "fantasies"? As it is well known, the fantasy's psychic function is to mitigate an original trauma that Freud termed an "internal" arousal and that Lacan renamed *jouissance*.

The various fantasies achieve this by providing this incomprehensible arousal, or *jouissance*, with some kind of interim representation. This provisional representation acts to reduce and siphon off the anxiety the subject experiences in its confrontation with what it cannot comprehend — the Other's desire⁷ — by supplying some kind of form to the nothing, the original “object” of anxiety. We can thus regard the different fantasies — hysteric, obsessional, and perverse — as different ways of “dramatizing” this nothing.⁸ Like comedy, with which they therefore share an intrinsic kinship, the fantasies put the nothing or “void” *on stage*.

The fantasy's generic “equation,” $\emptyset \diamond a$, can be put into mathematical terms in the following way:

$$\emptyset \sim (\{\emptyset\} = 1) = 0$$

This expresses how the void or unrepresentable point of being, \emptyset , is made “equivalent” to the empty set, $\{\emptyset\}$, which can serve as the first provisional representational placeholder for the void and, accordingly, it can be counted “as” One in the ordinal counting system. The ordinal count gives this void a name, the empty set or zero, which forms the first and original One from which all subsequent addition springs. The number 2 is accordingly derived from the empty set + 1, the number 3 is derived from the empty set + 1 + 1, and so on.

In the algebra of the fantasies, the ultimate result of this “equation” is “inertia” — the ideal state of the subject prior to the eruption of *jouissance*. The empty set, counted here as the first positive One, balances the pure negative (or minus “One”) of the void, returning the subject's psychic state to zero. Expressing the equation in words, we read,

Void, equated to the empty set, which can then be counted “as” One, gives the result “inertia” or zero

If we populate the generic formula of fantasy with the specific values of the hysteric's fantasy, we obtain the following:

$$\emptyset \sim (\{-\phi \diamond A\} = 1) = 0$$

In this formula, the generic empty set, $\{\emptyset\}$, has been filled in with the specifics of how the hysteric “stages” the appearance of the “nothing” or void. The equation depicts how the hysterical subject positions herself in the fantasy as vertically split between her phallic castration ($-\phi$) and the object a , which, as we saw, represents her identification with what she believes the Other (A) wants from her.⁹ Like the generic version of the equation, the hysterical fantasy also aims to “count” to One (whose ultimate result, as for all the fantasies, is a return to inertia or zero). However, we quickly see that the hysteric encounters a difficulty

in performing her “addition.” The problem lies with the a , the semblance of the Other’s desire with which the hysteric attempts to cover over her imaginary lack ($-\phi$). This a ensures that her count will always, like Achilles, either over- or undershoot its mark.

In Lacan’s teaching, the cause of this permanent over- or undershooting is found in the fact that the field of representation within which the fantasy is “staged” is not flat but topologically distorted by the a insofar as it belongs to a register other than that of the symbolic “count.” Created in the original nominal act of “making equivalence” that enabled the void to be bracketed as the empty set and counted “as” the first One, the a is that part of the void or real that was never completely taken up by the provisional presentation (which psychoanalysis calls the phallic signifier). As a result, the a guarantees that the way in which all fantasmatic “equations” stage the impossible sexual relation — through the exigencies of a subject-object relation — will always be inflected with something of the original traumatic jouissance that those fantasies were intended to palliate. This little sliver of jouissance that slipped into the symbolic through the back door during the original catastrophic equating of the void (“castration”) ensures that the fantasy of a complete or intact One (that is, an utterly seamless fusion of the subject and object) will never be attained. It is this a that drives the subject’s unconscious repetition. The a is the source of the continual failure that causes every count to One to always have to begin again. This is the reason, then, that any “mathematical” equation that contains the a will always come up lacking in its final result, and it will do so in a very precise way.¹⁰ The One-result of the hysterical fantasy will necessarily always be missing a little bit, since the presence of the a ensures the Other (A) will never be completely satisfied with her. Despite all the “narcissistic coatings,” as Lacan puts it, that subsequently come to envelop and surround it, the a never fully covers over the $-\phi$ of the hysteric’s castration, and the resultant One of the hysterical fantasy always falls short.¹¹

A similar but opposite thing happens with the obsessional. Although his desiring formula also aims to count to One, the obsessional’s One-result will always be a little bit in surfeit, again because it is produced by an object a that carries along with it something of the same impossible void. In the obsessional’s formula, this surplus is indicated by the little distinguishing supra symbols that mark the substitute a objects with which he showers the Other in the fantasy (a' , a'' , a''' , and so on). These marks give themselves away as the semblances of a that they are:

$$\emptyset \sim \{\{A \diamond \phi (a' a'' a''' \dots)\} = 1\} = 0$$

The question is why the obsessional’s One-result will always be a tiny bit more than One, while the hysteric’s is always a little less? It stems from the neurotic structures’ original affective response to the traumatic arousal of jouissance. In “Heredity and the Aetiology of the Neuroses,” Freud locates an original experience of unpleasure at the basis of hysteria, “an event of passive sexuality” that was “submitted to with indifference or with a small degree of annoyance or fright.”¹² Accordingly, as a “representative

[*Vorstellung*]” of this original experience, the *a* hauls something of this unpleasure along with it into the hysterical desiring fantasy, ensuring that her One-result will always be inflected with a tiny little lacking sign or “minus.” For the obsessional, by contrast, it concerns an event that originally, Freud says, “has given *pleasure*.”¹³ The obsessional’s *a* will thus ensure that his One-result always suffers from a tiny little surfeit, expressing how the obsessional’s “disguises” are just that tiny bit too successful in deceiving the Other. At some point, the Other will inevitably take him too literally and mistake the semblance for the real thing. In this way, the Other will sabotage the fantasy that he can continue substituting new objects for himself *ad infinitum*.

Although Lacan maintains that the sexual relation “doesn’t stop not being written,” if this impossibility undergoes a certain procedure, the sexual relation “stops not being written.” As the discussion above helps us to see, the sexual relation evidently “stops not being written” at the moment when the impossible is “mathematized,” that is, formalized as the “provisional representation” of the phallic signifier. Hence, contrary to the popular idea of the phallus as a form of determination, as a *provisional* representation, the phallus is therefore “contingent.” As Lacan states, “it is as a mode of the contingent that the phallic function stops not being written” (94).¹⁴ By this I understand him to mean that this formalization of the void of the sexual relation might not have taken place (or might not have fully succeeded, as is the case, for example, for psychotic and perverse subjects). If we follow Lacan’s formula of love to its final step, we go from the contingency implied by the phallus to a necessity that Lacan expresses in the phrase “doesn’t stop being written [*ne cesse pas de s’écrire*].” This step is famously taken by “love.” All love, Lacan explains, “subsisting only on the basis of the ‘stops not being written,’ tends to make the negation shift to the ‘doesn’t stop being written,’ doesn’t stop, won’t stop” (145). In this formulation, whose seeming nonsense appears worthy of a Kierkegaardian heroine, Lacan appears to be asserting that love is nothing more than a shift of a negation in a sentence about writing: “The displacement of the negation from the ‘stops not being written’ to the ‘doesn’t stop being written,’ in other words, from contingency to necessity — there lies the point of suspension to which all love is attached” (145).

Despite its apparent nonsensicalness, what Lacan is driving at in this distinctly unromantic sounding statement is the way love’s “doesn’t stop being written” enables the subject to approach the impossible *jouissance* of the sexual relation in a way that is not entirely governed by (phallic) contingency and its imaginary stagings in the fundamental fantasies. But as it now appears, this is not to say that love somehow bypasses or short-circuits the phallic fantasies. Love, it would seem, “subsists” *only* on the basis of the “stops not being written” or, as we are now comprehending this phrase, on the basis of the formalization of impossible *jouissance* by means of the phallus. However, whereas the phallic formalization succeeded in mathematizing the real to produce the first signifier (the phallus or “empty set” in my schema), with their use of letters the fantasies perform an additional formalization and write this real. Letterating the

phallus's (binary) numericization of the void in this way, the fantasies can be said to perform a second-order abstraction of that first suturing act that produced the phallic signifier. In so doing, they enable us to achieve the breakthrough Lacan credits to Cantorian set theory.

Emmeline and Charles can once more come to our rescue in understanding precisely how writing accomplishes this breakthrough. As we have seen in the discussion above, each of their fantasies are limited in advance by the structural failure of the a that ensures that none of their attempts to count to One will succeed, obliging them to begin again in a gesture of infinite repetition. Nevertheless, it seems that if each of their individual unsuccessful attempts are grouped together in a series, a "One" may be reached by means of a different mathematical procedure than that of the (failed) count. The method for obtaining this "supplementary One," as Lacan calls it, relies on the same axiom that set theory proposes: The power set of x is greater than x .¹⁵

Rather than taxing ourselves with an explanation of the mathematical basis of this axiom, we can turn to Lacan's discussion of the same problem in Seminar XIV, *The Logic of Fantasy*, where he introduces this idea of a supplementary One in the context of a discussion of Bertrand Russell's famous paradox regarding the catalogue of all catalogues that do not contain themselves. In his lesson of 23 November 1966, Lacan counters Russell's catalogue with the idea of a catalogue that lists all of the books referred to in a single volume's bibliography.¹⁶ Unlike Russell's catalogue, there is no question of whether the book whose bibliography is being listed should be included (of course it should not). However, another catalogue that lists all the books that a second book's bibliography contains may well include the title of the first book (although, naturally, not that of the second). By effectively grouping books into "sets" in this way, Lacan swiftly demonstrates how a totality may be achieved without falling into Russell's paradox. As Lacan explains, although each bibliographic catalogue will not include the title of the book from which it has been derived, once we group these catalogues together into a series, it is not unthinkable that, between them, they will succeed in listing all of the books in the world.¹⁷

To return to our first lovers: Although the a 's structural failure ensures that Emmeline and Charles will, by a certain inevitability, fail to reach their desired object in the fantasmatic count, if each of these unsuccessful attempts are collated and grouped together in a series, an "all" may be created that is more than the sum of its individual parts. Inaccessible to the count, this "all" or supplementary One results from the principle of limitation that is encoded into every fantasy in the form of the letter.

Space constraints prevent a proper treatment of the precise way that love, through the nonsense it suddenly induces lovers to speak, gives us access to this "supplementary One" that is "not grasped [or counted] in the chain," as Lacan puts it in Seminar XIV.¹⁸ Let us conclude instead with a final comment. We have seen how, as an "assemblage," the letter by definition keeps the original relations of the subject, the Other, and the a — which constitute the One — intact, even as the letter also permits us to go on

to manipulate multiple instances of these Ones. Accordingly, one could say that when the letter “writes” the failure of the phallic count to One in the fantasies, it simultaneously carries with it the history of that signifier’s original formation. The letter, as it were, carries some kind of “memory” of the One’s primordial creation *ex nihilo*. I cannot help speculating that it is something of this “memory” that Lacan is referring to when, in Seminar XX, he states, “Writing is [...] a trace in which an effect of language can be read” (121). Within it, the letter contains the traces of the original formalization that first enabled a signifier, One, to stand in for a disparate group of objects. Invisibly stamped with the “memory” of the One’s original formation, the letter is thus the carrier of that archaic decision of substitution that Lacan calls an “effect of language.”



1. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: Encore, 1972-1973*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 122. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically within the text.
2. Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or, vol. 1*, trans. David F. Swenson and Lillian Marvin Swenson, rev. Howard A. Johnson (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), 246. Subsequent consecutive references will appear parenthetically within the text.
3. In Seminar XIII, for example, Lacan provides a working definition of the object *a* as that which “falls” (*chute*) from the field of the symbolic. See Lacan, *L’objet de la psychanalyse* (1965-1966), unpublished seminar, 22 December 1965.
4. As Lacan puts it in Seminar XX, “Something true can still be said about what cannot be demonstrated” (119).
5. Both Freud and Lacan have wavered on this point, with Freud ultimately opting for an original, non-negotiable choice that is “independent of experience.” See Freud’s discussion of a seeming conversion from anxiety hysteria to obsessional neurosis in Sigmund Freud, “The Disposition to Obsessional Neurosis,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (hereafter *S.E.*), ed. and trans. James Strachey et al. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), 12:317-26. But even if the choice itself can never be undone, this is not to say the way it was made cannot be revised, as Paul Verhaeghe explains in his elaboration of the various “therapeutic effects” of psychoanalysis. See Paul Verhaeghe, *On Being Normal and Other Disorders*, trans. Sigi Jöttkandt (New York: Other Press, 2004).
6. See Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre VIII: Le transfert, 1960-1961*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2001), 277-91.
7. In Seminar IX, Lacan defines anxiety as “the sensation of the desire of the Other.” See Lacan, *L’identification* (1961-1962), unpublished seminar, 4 April 1962.
8. Psychosis has no fantasy but what Lacan describes as “delusion.”
9. See the discussion of the hysteric’s fantasy in Lacan, *Le transfert*, 277-91. For a refreshingly lucid explanation of this formula, see Verhaeghe, *On Being Normal and Other Disorders*, 373-81.
10. For a mathematical explanation of the derivation of the *a*, see Lacan’s discussion in *La logique du fantasme* (1966-1967), unpublished seminar, 22 and 29 January 1967. Briefly, the *a* is not “equal” to 1, but it holds the value of the relation of one term in a Fibonacci series to the next. Thus, if $1+1+2$, $1+2+3$, in the converging series (hysteria) or, in reverse, the diverging series (obsession) $1-a$, $2a-1$, $2-3a$, and so on, the “value” of *a* will always be the proportional difference between one term and the next in the Fibonacci series, a difference that is computed as 0.618. Lacan’s use of the Fibonacci

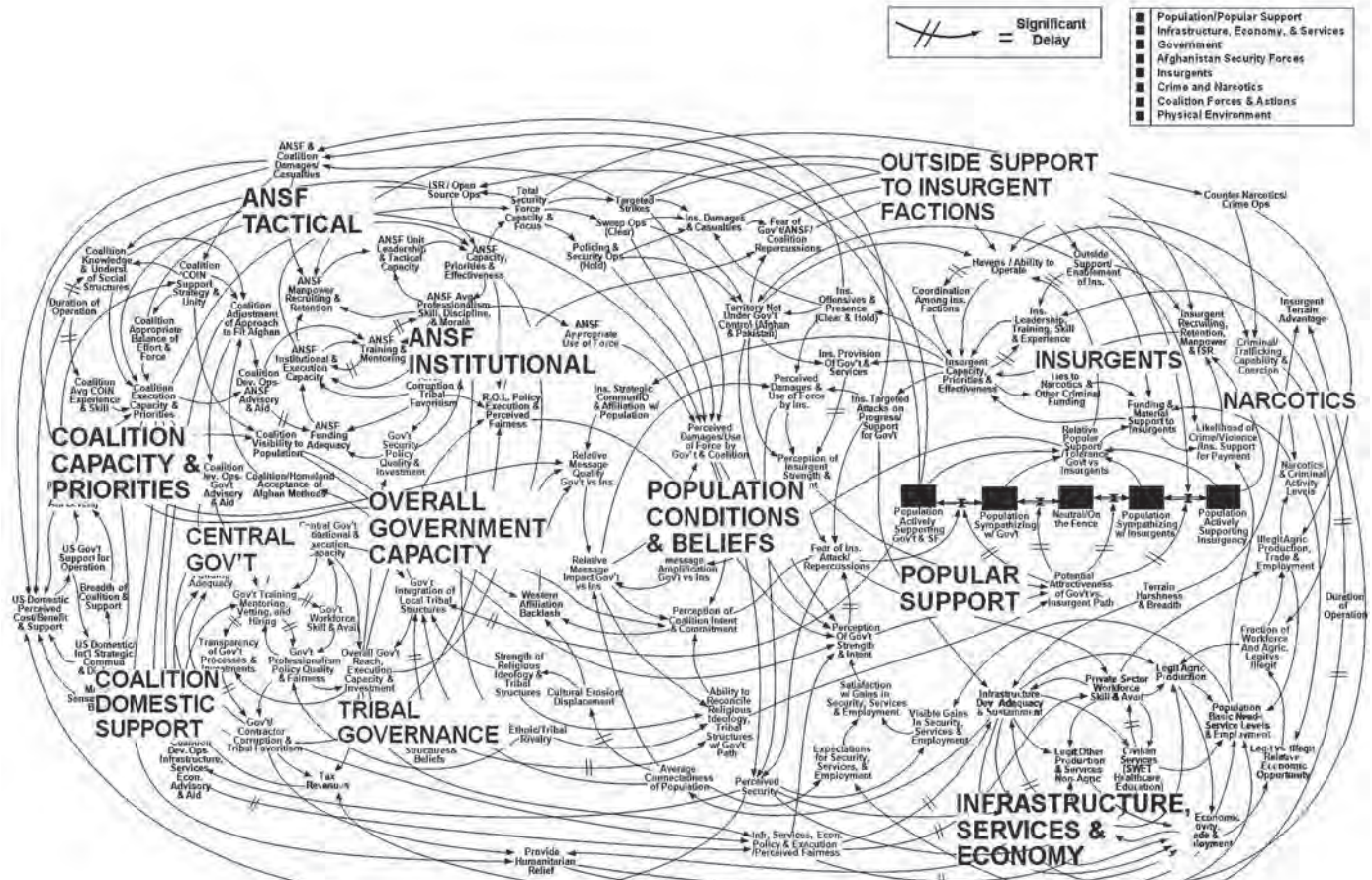
series here and elsewhere is designed to model the relationship of the speaking subject to the signifier that represents the subject for another signifier. As Lacan explains, “here it is the relationship not of 1 to 1 but of 1 to 2 that is at stake” (lesson of 29 January 1967).

11. See Lacan, *L'acte psychanalytique* (1967-1968), unpublished seminar, 21 February 1968.
12. Freud, “Heredity and the Aetiology of the Neuroses,” in *S.E.* 3:155.
13. *Ibid.*, 155.
14. The English translation is a little ambiguous here. To clarify, it is not the “phallic function” that “stops not being written”; it is the unwritable *jouissance* that stops not being written (in the form of the phallic function).
15. See Mary Tiles, *The Philosophy of Set Theory: An Introduction to Cantor's Paradise* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 104-5.
16. Lacan, *La logique du fantasme* (1966-1967), 23 November 1966.
17. This can be expressed in the following diagram, in which each letter outside each set represents the title of the “book” whose bibliography is being catalogued:

A (B, C, D)
B (A, C, D)
C (A, B, D)
D (A, B, C)

Between them, every “book” has thus been catalogued (represented), even though there is no single catalogue that contains them all. See Lacan, *La logique du fantasme* (1966-1967), 16 November 1966 and 23 November 1966.

18. “[B]y simply closing the chain, there results that each group of four [catalogues in the example Lacan is using] can easily leave outside itself the extraneous signifier, which can serve to designate the group, for the simple reason that it is not represented in it, and that nevertheless the whole chain will be found to constitute the totality of all these signifiers, giving rise to this additional unit, uncountable as such, which is essential for a whole series of structures, which are precisely the ones on which I founded, since the year 1960, my whole operation of identification.” Lacan, *La logique du fantasme* (1966-1967), 23 November 1966.





NEUROLITERATURE

catherine malabou

Neuroliterature is not a name for a new discipline that, like neurolinguistics, neuropsychanalysis, and neurophilosophy, would tend to explain the way in which our mental acts are rooted in neurobiological processes. Even if we must pay these new sciences the most acute attention, insofar as they are currently re-sketching the inner and outer boundaries of the Humanities, my purpose here is different and wishes to avoid all forms of reductionism.

Current developments in neurobiology will be present in my discourse but not as the possibility of a new foundation for literature. Speaking from the point of view of continental philosophy, I am interested in the way neurological research helps to radicalize and challenge certain major motifs that characterize what took place in the second half of the twentieth century under the names “the deconstruction of subjectivity” in Derrida, on the one hand, and “the archeology of knowledge” in Foucault, on the other. However different and sometimes opposed as these two movements — let us call them *movements* for want of a better name — might have been, they nonetheless shared what I will call a common faith in literature. I will not have time here to insist upon Derrida’s characterization of literature as the very site of faith, so I will limit myself to considering the Foucauldian structure or economy of this faith, which could be formulated as a faith in the outside.

Literature promises the opening of an outside: an outside of philosophy, an outside of representation, an outside of “discourse,” and, above all, of course, an outside of science, which has always been identified — by both Foucault and Derrida — with power, regulation, normalization, and discipline. Indeed, this “outside” will be my topic here, and I will proceed by focusing on Foucault’s reading of Blanchot in his short but fundamental book entitled *Maurice Blanchot: The Thought From Outside*. In this book, Foucault outlines the problematic by declaring that “the event that gave rise to what we called ‘literature’ is [...] a passage to the ‘outside’: language escapes the mode of being of discourse — in other words the dynasty of representation — and literary speech develops from itself, forming a network in which each point is distinct, distant from even its closest neighbors, and has a position in relation to every other point in a space that simultaneously holds and separates them all.”¹

From my insistence upon this Foucauldian understanding of literature, one can certainly gather just how far I am situating myself from a reductive neurobiological approach to literature. But what, then, is the function of the prefix “neuro-” in this text? Why choose this title, “Neuroliterature”? Neuroliterature, here, helps me to name a crack or flaw — which is not to say a contradiction — in the very notion of literature when it is understood as the thought from outside. Today, the very thing that literature was supposed to resist the most — namely, scientific discourse — now paradoxically appears as that which is both revealing the truth of literature and opening the outside that it was supposed, but failed, to open. If I absolutely agree with Foucault that there is no genuine thought without a passage to the outside, then we have to come to the conclusion that literature no longer serves the function of an outside for anybody. Blanchot’s fictions, therefore, cannot constitute a neutral space or shelter that would protect us from the mastery of transcendental subjectivity and discourse.

I will further radicalize this conclusion and state that neurobiology itself appears to function as this absolute outside of literature, as that which gives the outside in literature its effective meaning. Neurobiology achieves the effective neutralization of subjectivity. In other words, the deconstruction of subjectivity that is at work in contemporary neurobiology is the material and effective accomplishment of neutrality, the material and effective opening of the “neutral space” that “the space of literature [*l’espace littéraire*]” was supposed to have inaugurated (12). It must be emphasized, however, that this revelation that the outside escapes literature, that the literary outside is outside of itself, is not merely a contingent fact, something that is possible only today and only with today’s neurobiological developments; rather, it is inscribed within the very concept or structure of literature, as Foucault, Blanchot, Derrida, and others understand it.

In the second chapter of his book, entitled “The Experience of the Outside,” Foucault characterizes the birth of modern literature as a historical event that sheds light on a new essence of language, a language deprived precisely of any subjectivity: “The breakthrough to a language from which the subject is excluded, the bringing to light of a perhaps irremediable incompatibility between the appearing of language in its being and consciousness of the self in its identity, is an experience now being heralded

at diverse points in culture: in the simple gesture of writing as in attempts to formalize language; in the study of myths as in psychoanalysis; in the search for a Logos that would be like the birthplace of all of Western reason” (15). Moreover, the emergence of the being of language is explicitly linked with the fading of subjectivity itself, insofar as Foucault declares that “the being of language only appears for itself with the disappearance of the subject” (15). In this respect, then, Blanchot is the privileged witness to this dual moment of emergence/disappearance. To the extent that his own existence negates itself and disappears in the economy of writing, Blanchot — as a subject — disappears in language. In fact, as Foucault observes, “Blanchot is perhaps more than just another witness to this thought. So far has he withdrawn into the manifestation of his work, so completely is he, not hidden by his texts, but absent from their existence and absent by virtue of the marvelous force of their existence, that for us he is that thought itself — its real, absolutely distant, shimmering, invisible presence, its inevitable law, its calm, infinite, measured strength” (19).

When the subject disappears or withdraws, a certain kind of reflexivity or reflection disappears and withdraws along with it, namely the reflexivity or reflection of consciousness. Another type of reflexivity or reflection is then substituted in the place of conscious mirroring — the reflection of language upon itself, which coincides with the emergence of its own being. Language turns back upon itself and designates itself, and literature therefore becomes the site of this self-referentiality of language: “Modern literature is characterized by a doubling back that enables it to designate itself” (12). Unlike the doubling of consciousness, however, this doubling of literature does not mark the emergence of interiority. Rather, it paradoxically creates a non-coincidence between the two terms of the reflexive movement, with this non-coincidence appearing precisely as an outside. In this sense, the outside is the paradoxical result of the turning back of language upon itself: “Literature is not language approaching itself until it reaches the point of its fiery manifestation; it is rather language getting as far away from itself as possible. And if, in this setting ‘outside of itself,’ it unveils its own being, the sudden clarity reveals not a folding back but a gap, not a turning back of signs upon themselves but a dispersion” (12).

My point is the following: Is it not the case that literature, in the sense Foucault gives to it, suffers precisely from placing too much and exceedingly deep confidence — or faith, as I said to begin with — in language? Has the so-called “being of language” not, in fact, come to constitute a limit to the very thing it was supposed to accomplish, that is, the disappearance or deconstruction of subjectivity? Even if Foucault and Blanchot insist upon the novelty of the concept of language at work in modern literature — a language freed from representation, meaning, reference, and so on — can we not consider that a certain notion of authenticity governs this concept, which would prevent literature from becoming what it was attempting to become: a neutral and, consequently, inauthentic space? Or, to go a step further, what if there were to be something other than language on the outside, a secret non-verbal origin of language? What if we could go outside language itself?

Contemporary neurobiology explores the space opened up by the fact that it is impossible for the brain to reflect upon itself; we cannot, by any means, become conscious of our own brain. Thomas Metzinger, quoting T. E. Feinberg, stresses this impossibility: “There is no way the subject, from the ‘inside,’ can become aware of his own neurons, from the ‘inside.’ They can be known only objectively, from the ‘outside.’ There is no inner eye watching the brain itself, perceiving neurons and glia. The brain is ‘transparent’ from the stand point of the subject.”² This consciousness of our own brain is impossible, and we cannot become aware of the originary patterns that form the neural self, precisely because these patterns are pre-verbal. The origin of language itself then becomes something both totally obscure and totally meaningful, and the brain could thus be characterized as a mechanism that creates its own fiction, creates itself as a fiction, for want of consciousness, reflexivity, and an appropriate language. Indeed, in his dialogue with the French neurobiologist Jean-Pierre Changeux, Paul Ricoeur argues that we can say “I grasp with my hands” and “I see with my eyes,” but we cannot really say “I think with my brain,” because the expression “my brain” cannot be associated with any possible experience.³ Nobody can feel his or her own brain; the brain does not belong to the body proper. The brain, he continues, is never here but always there, nowhere — it has no site. According to Ricoeur’s argument, these phenomena mark the philosophical failure of neurobiology: The brain cannot be a philosophical object because nobody is able to say “my brain,” and therefore nobody is able to speak about their own brain. But, in fact, it is my contention that this obscure biological impersonality, neutrality, and exteriority poses a challenge to the phenomenological concepts of both the proper and language. As such, the brain would be the site of literature in particular and thought in general precisely because it is nothing but its own meaningless fiction. Neuroliterature, then, would be literature minus itself.

In order to address these issues, I will now examine two major characteristics of the outside, as Foucault and Blanchot elaborate it, and compare them to their neurobiological counterparts. These two characteristics are reversibility and transparency.

REVERSIBILITY

In *The Space of Literature*, we find that the reversibility of language is rendered possible by the impossibility of the subject turning back on itself; the reversibility of language is thus a consequence of the impossible reversibility of subjectivity. When the subject tries to turn back on itself, Blanchot says, it disappears in the pure neutrality of language. In the loop of language, the subject is broken, consumed by the being of language that is mirroring itself. This impossibility of turning back on ourselves must be understood as an ontological condition: “What makes us necessarily unable in our own fashion to turn back? Our limits, apparently: we are limited beings. When we look in front of us, we do not see what is behind. When we are here, it is on the condition that we renounce elsewhere. The limit retains us, contains us, thrusts us back toward what we are, turns us back toward ourselves, away from the other, makes us averted beings.”⁴

We do not see what is behind: The ontological condition at stake for Blanchot here is not simply that of finitude. It is the condition of mortals who are not beings-toward-death, in the Heideggerian sense, but rather beings coming back from death — much as Orpheus comes back from Hell or the Underworld. Indeed, in *The Space of Literature*, we find frequent reference to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, which takes place in the kingdom of the dead and concerns the mortal danger of turning back. In a section entitled “Orpheus’ Gaze,” Blanchot elucidates this condition in a passage worth quoting at length:

Orpheus’s error seems [...] to lie in the desire which moves him to see and to possess Eurydice, he whose destiny is only to sing of her. He is Orpheus only in the song: he cannot have any relation to Eurydice except within the hymn. He has life and truth only after the poem and because of it, and Eurydice represents nothing other than this magic dependence which outside the song makes him a shade and renders him free, alive, and sovereign only in the Orphic space, according to Orphic measure. Yes, this is true: only in the song does Orpheus have power over Eurydice. But in the song too, Eurydice is already lost, and Orpheus himself is the dispersed Orpheus; the song immediately makes him “infinitely dead.” He loses Eurydice because he desires her beyond the measured limits of the song, and he loses himself, but this desire, and Eurydice lost, and Orpheus dispersed are necessary to the song, just as the ordeal of eternal inertia is necessary to the work.⁵

Foucault himself echoes this motif in the sixth chapter of *The Thought from Outside*, “Eurydice and the Sirens”:

Some of [Blanchot’s] narratives, for example *L’arrêt de mort*, are dedicated to the gaze of Orpheus: the gaze that at the wavering threshold of death goes in search of the submerged presence and tries to bring its image back to the light of day, but only secures the nothingness in which the poem can subsequently appear. In Blanchot, however, Orpheus does not see Eurydice’s face in a movement that conceals it and makes it visible: he is able to contemplate it face to face; he sees with his own eyes the open gaze of death, “the most terrible gaze a living thing can encounter.” It is that gaze, or rather the narrator’s gaze into that gaze, that exerts an extraordinary power of attraction. (44)

Both of these extraordinarily beautiful passages insist upon the fact that the subject is already dead. Death is the place from which we come — this is why we cannot return to our origin — and language, as the strange voice of that death, is what gazes at us from behind. As a consequence, the poem, the song, writing, or literature can only appear as spectral experiences that proceed from an inertia, idleness, or lack of work on the part of the author.

Still, what Foucault calls “nothingness” is not nothing. “There is hope, then, for our turning back,” as Blanchot says, “through a conversion of the consciousness [...]. Such a conversion would turn [consciousness] away toward a profounder intimacy, toward the most interior and the most invisible, where we are no longer anxious to do and act, but free of ourselves and of real things and of phantoms of things.”⁶ There is something more profound and more interior than interiority, more authentic than visibility, which is language itself. The space of literature is the space of the promise of the purity of language.

In his book *Being No One*, Thomas Metzinger is concerned with the neural formation of consciousness. He shows that the first person perspective, and thus consciousness, is not an origin or a foundation but the result of a series of many progressive biological processes. These processes are themselves doomed precisely to disappear from the realm of consciousness. Some other processes in our brain “swallow” and “erase” all of the previous processing stages that were necessary for the construction of consciousness and the first person perspective, and this erasure “is activated in such a fast and reliable way as to make any earlier processing stages inaccessible to introspection.”⁷ Even so, it still takes a certain amount of physical time to construct the phenomenal experience of conscious instantaneity. But the experience of the immediacy of consciousness thus emerges as a “temporal fiction” that proceeds from the impossibility of consciousness turning back on itself or having access to its own past.⁸ Once again, we cannot turn back on ourselves. Neural processes produce an effect of speed and render introspection impossible. Any movement toward introspection comes too late: “Self-modeling, in terms of its logical structure, is an infinite process: A system that would model itself as currently modeling itself would thereby start generating a chain of nested system-related mental content, an endless progression of ‘self-containing,’ of conscious self-modeling, which would quickly devour its computational resources and paralyze it for practical purposes.... Because, as I have just pointed out, self-modeling possesses a potentially infinite and circular logical structure, it has to find an efficient way to break the reflexive loop.”⁹ In all of this, we see that the elementary biological form of our subjectivity does not correspond with what we generally call “interiority.” It consists in a series of mechanical processes or loops. If we were able to turn back on ourselves and see these loops, we would see a labyrinth, a maze, which would also interrupt any kind of linguistic capacity.

It appears that instead of promoting a substantial material vision of subjectivity, current neurobiology explores the absence of the self to itself and the impossibility of auto-affection. There could be no power of writing, no thought from outside, nor any elaboration of the subject’s disappearance without this ordinary and meaningless, impersonal, and neutral biological delusion of the first person. Neurobiology would then appear as the gaze that materiality casts on writing, the gaze from behind that suspends its authenticity.

TRANSPARENCY

Transparency, like reversibility, is linked with death. When reading Rilke, Blanchot declares, “Death enters into its own invisibility, passes from opacity to its transparency, from its terrifying reality to its ravishing unreality. It is in this passage its own conversion; through this conversion it is the ungraspable, the invisible — the source, however, of all invisibility.”¹⁰ Transparency also characterizes the essence of things once they have been transfigured by literature, converted into their non-objective presence, their fictional being, and, once again, their invisibility. By the same token, Foucault also notices that “the language of fiction [...] must no longer be a power that tirelessly produces images and makes them shine, but rather a power that undoes them, that lessens their overload, that infuses them with an inner transparency that illuminates them little by little until they burst and scatter in the lightness of the unimaginable” (23).

Transparency may then be seen as the result of the murder of things by and in literature. But this redoubling of death by literature, for Blanchot, is also what gives death its purity, that is, its truth. Literature is defined as an effort to raise death to itself: “One must not forget, in fact, that this effort to raise death to itself, to make the point where it loses itself within itself coincide with the point at which I lose myself outside of myself, is not a simple internal affair, but implies an immense responsibility toward things and is possible only through their mediation — through the movement which is entrusted to me and which must raise things themselves to a point of greater reality and truth.”¹¹ Hence, transparency is inseparable from this redemption, this raising of things to their essence, in a kind of ontological salvation.

Metzinger, too, analyzes the neurobiological effect of speed — which renders true introspection impossible — and the invisibility of self-modeling as productions of transparency. The brain is a transparent self-model, and the subject is only an effect of this neural transparency. Transparency thus coincides with the nonexistence of the subject: “What in philosophy of mind is called the ‘phenomenal self’ and what in scientific or folk-psychological contexts frequently is simply referred to as ‘the self’ is the content of a phenomenally transparent self model.”¹² The erasure of pre-subjective processes creates a window through which we see *while never seeing the glass of the window itself*. Metzinger declares that “Nobody ever was or had a self. [...] The phenomenal self is not a thing, but a process — and the subjective experience of *being someone* emerges if a conscious information-processing system operates under a transparent self-model. [...] It is transparent: you look right through it. You don’t see it. But you see *with* it. [...] [Y]ou constantly *confuse* yourself with the content of the self-model currently activated by your brain.”¹³ In this sense, transparency constitutes a special form of darkness — it cannot be seen as a point of greater reality or truth. Thus, this particular form of the death of truth gives life to subjectivity but is, itself, absolutely deprived of any purity or signification. Transparency, then, is paradoxically conceived of as a wall — much like the transparent windowpane — and it does not allow for any exit or transcendence toward light. The biological being of being is the non-thought from outside.

The only possible way to have access to this transparency is when it is impaired and becomes imperfectly transparent. If a crack in a window can serve to emphasize its transparency, then the corresponding transparency in neurobiology would be emphasized when brain damage occurs. That is why Antonio Damasio talks about the brain lesion as a “method” by which to explore the brain from inside. But, of course, when our neural transparency — or the impossibility of turning back on ourselves — is impaired, what happens is not the emergence of a truth but, on the contrary, the emergence of a total indifference to truth. The “survivors of neurological disease,” as Damasio calls them in *The Feeling of What Happens*, sometimes lead a life whose temporality and structure are almost totally destroyed.¹⁴ But all of these survivors have one thing in common — they all endure a profound change of personality as a result of this destruction. The loss of their previous self almost always drives the patients toward indifference, coldness, a lack of concern, and “a marked alteration of the ability to experience feelings.”¹⁵

In *Descartes’ Error*, Damasio refers to the case of a patient named Elliot, who had a tumor removed from the frontal lobe of his brain:

The surgery was a success in every respect, and insofar as such tumors tend not to grow again, the outlook was excellent. What was to prove less felicitous was the turn in Elliot’s personality. [...] He seemed to approach life on the same neutral note. I never saw a tinge of emotion in my many hours of conversation with him: no sadness, no impatience, no frustration with my incessant and repetitious questioning. I learned that his behavior was the same in his own daily environment. He tended not to display anger, and on the rare occasions when he did, the outburst was swift; in no time he would be his usual new self, calm and without grudges. [...] This was astounding. Try to imagine it. Try to imagine not feeling pleasure when you contemplate a painting you love or hear a favorite piece of music. Try to imagine yourself forever robbed of that possibility and yet aware of the intellectual contents of the visual or musical stimulus, and also aware that once it did give you pleasure. We might summarize Elliot’s predicament as *to know but not to feel*.¹⁶

In this case, the mechanism of mapping seems to be separated from all emotional processes; the attachment of the self to itself, or concern, no longer seems to take place. And, moreover, there is no possible healing of this condition: “He seemed beyond redemption, like the repeat offender who professes sincere repentance but commits another offense shortly after.”¹⁷ But Damasio draws even nearer to the terms of my argument when discussing the case of a patient he calls “L.” She had suffered a stroke that “produced damage to the internal and upper regions of the frontal lobe in both hemispheres. An area known as the cingulate cortex was damaged, along with nearby regions. She had suddenly become motionless and speechless. [...] The term *neutral* helps convey the equanimity of her expression, but once you concentrated on her eyes, the word *vacuous* gets closer to the mark. She was there but not there. [...] Again, emotion was missing.”¹⁸

BEYOND DESTRUCTION

Finally, I would like to briefly consider the even more serious cases of what is called *anosognosia* (from the Greek *nosos*, meaning “disease,” and *gnosis*, meaning “knowledge”). This term denotes the inability to recognize a state of disease in one’s own organism: “No less dramatic than the oblivion that anosognosic patients have regarding their sick limbs is the lack of concern they show for their overall situation, the lack of emotion they exhibit, the lack of feeling they report when questioned about it. The news that there was a major stroke [...] is usually received with equanimity, sometimes with gallows humor, but never with anguish or sadness, tears or anger, despair or panic.”¹⁹ Anosognosia is a general lack of the perception of damage, but there is a more specific form of anosognosia — also known as “Anton’s syndrome,” after the nineteenth century Austrian physician Gabriel Anton — characterized by the inability to perceive one’s own blindness. In a talk given to the Society of Physicians of Austria, Anton described patients suffering from this syndrome as “soul-blind for their own blindness.”²⁰ Anton’s syndrome characterizes the inability to make a certain functional loss available for conscious experience. There are also patients with deafness denial, which Anton described as “soul-deaf for their own deafness.”²¹ What is important here is that this denegation has nothing to do with what Freud calls *Verneinung*. It is not an unconscious phenomenon or attitude. It is a pure loss and a pure absence with no intention sustaining it. Brain damage always, to a greater or lesser degree, causes these identity disorders and disintegrating self-models, which Metzinger very appropriately describes as “impossible egos.”²²

The thought from outside cannot only be a thought of destruction. Literature, in Foucault and Blanchot, as I briefly articulated it, is the very language of death and trauma. If we come from death, from hell, it means that we are post-traumatic subjects. This is also what Foucault explores in his famous essay “What is an Author?” in which he shows that writing has the power to kill its author. The outside is the post-traumatic, and I had been convinced, for a very long time, by the argument that only literature, conceived of as neutrality, could give us access to this unthinkable space. My encounter with neurobiology helped me realize, however, that something was preventing literature from carrying out this self-destruction — language is the very thing that protects this neutral space from its own neutralization. The purity of death, the truth of death, and the authenticity of death — even when presented aporetically — guarantee the indestructible structure of the subject’s destruction. Thus, if neurobiology is able to give us some idea of what a totally neutral thought from the outside may be, it is precisely because the brain’s obscurity to itself is structurally unsurpassable, and the only things at work in the neural space are transparent erasure or pathological indifference. Confronted with this structure, as I said in the beginning, we can do nothing but invent a kind of reflection of the brain upon itself. We can only invent, as Slavoj Žižek puts it in *The Parallax View*, “a fiction observing itself.”²³ The confrontation between literature and neurobiology today might then help us to free biology from the exile it has suffered for so long. Perhaps, then, we can explore the possibility that science, with its knowledge about the absence of any non-fictional reality, can bring its discoveries to bear upon fiction and thus engage deconstruction itself in a new era.

1. Michel Foucault, *Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from Outside*, trans. Brian Massumi (New York: Zone Books, 1990), 12. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically within the text.
2. Thomas Metzinger, *Being No One: The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity* (Cambridge: Zone Books, 2003), 335.
3. See Jean-Pierre Changeux and Paul Ricoeur, "A Necessary Encounter" and "Body and Mind: In Search of a Common Discourse," in *What Makes Us Think? A Neuroscientist and a Philosopher Argue about Ethics, Human Nature, and the Brain*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 3-32 & 34-69.
4. Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 133-34.
5. *Ibid.*, 172-73.
6. *Ibid.*, 138.
7. Metzinger, *Being No One*, 98.
8. *Ibid.*, 57.
9. *Ibid.*, 338.
10. Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 147.
11. *Ibid.*, 150.
12. Metzinger, *Being No One*, 331.
13. *Ibid.*, 1.
14. Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1999), 53.
15. Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), xvi.
16. *Ibid.*, 36 & 45.
17. *Ibid.*, 38.
18. Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens*, 101-3.
19. Damasio, *Descartes' Error*, 64.
20. Metzinger, *Being No One*, 430.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*, 429.
23. Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 219.

ATGGGCGCACTGGCCCGGGCGCTGCTGCTGCCTCTGCTGGCCCAGTGGCTCCTGCGCGCC
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 A L A L E P A L A S P A G A A N F L A M
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 V D N L Q G D S G R G Y Y L E M L I G T
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 P P Q K L Q I L V D T G S S N F A V A G
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 D L V T I P K G F N T S F L V N I A T I
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 F E S E N F F L P G I K W N G I L G L A
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 Y A T L A K P S S S L E T F F D S L V T
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 Q A N I P N V F S M Q M C G A G L P V A
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 G S G T N G G S L V L G G I E P S L Y K
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 G D I W Y T P I K E E W Y Y Q I E I L K
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 I V D S G T T L L R L P Q K V F D A V V
 GAAGCTGTGGCCCGCATCTCTGATTCCAGAATTCTCTGATGGTTTCTGGACTGGGTCC
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 Q L A C W T N S E T P W S Y F P K I S I
 TACCTGAGAGATGAGAACTCCAGCAGGTCAATCCGTATCACAATCCTGCCTCAGCTTTAC
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BARTLEBY'S PLACE

alénka zupancič

With every step we take in Herman Melville's story, and with each additional time we hear Bartleby utter his "I would prefer not to," this sentence becomes more sinister, more disturbing, and more difficult to pin down to any specific intention or meaning.¹ When it occurs for the first time, it strikes us as almost comical (and some thread of comedy is doubtlessly preserved in the later stages of the story; for example, when all the employees suddenly start using the word "prefer"). Later on it acquires a dimension of suspense: We cannot help but suspect that there must be something behind it — either Bartleby knows exactly what he is doing and what he wants to achieve, or perhaps he is there as a kind of external rendering, a metaphor of the narrator's own malaise, which has piled up during the long years of *his* boring office work. It is as if Bartleby were only speaking aloud the unconscious desire of his employer, "I would prefer to...no longer do this," and as if this were the reason the employer gets involved in the play of such unusual reactions to Bartleby, which seem to suggest some involvement on the level of desire and guilt. Yet, the nearer we draw to the end of the story, the clearer it becomes that we will be left without a possible psychological explanation and the possibility of taking the whole story as an allegory of the narrator's own distress.

There is no surprising turn, revelation, or lesson at the end of the story, nothing that would give some sense to what has gone on up to that point. What lingers in the air is only this strange sentence, which keeps ringing in our heads well beyond the death of the protagonist: “I would prefer not to.”

This short essay will not venture to propose an elaborate commentary on the story as a whole, its explicit and implicit references, or its context. It will simply focus on the (rather obvious) fact that the great and most outstanding achievement of Melville’s story is this singular, peculiar sentence. In other words, I will (im)modestly join the rather long line of commentators who have already tried their hand at the question of what makes this sentence so intriguing and powerful, and I will limit myself to developing one or two points that seem important to understanding it. So, what is that uncertain feeling that surrounds Bartleby’s “I would prefer not to”?

Initially, of course, there is the indisputable element of surprise. In view of how the story unfolds up to this point, using all of its means to emphasize the dimension of routine and a well-established ritual (even the peculiarities of the other two scriveners are completely ritualized, their caprices alternating steadily like day and night or, more precisely, morning and afternoon), Bartleby’s words have the effect of a bolt from the blue. In a universe in which it seems that, by definition, nothing could possibly happen, suddenly something *happens*, the *impossible* happens: a tiny sentence, which throws the universe out of joint. And yet, the element of surprise itself does not in any way exhaust the strange power of this sentence. The surprise here would be in no way diminished if Bartleby were to reply to his boss’s demand to help him examine documents with a simple “No!” Given the context, this kind of rebellion would certainly be surprising, yet it would be precisely that — a rebellion. The well-established rules would be broken and the boss would react accordingly; for a rule and its transgression go hand in hand, confirming and supporting each other. A rebellion has its structural place within a given situation, but Bartleby’s sentence does not. Bartleby’s words put the boss in a position in which he cannot react appropriately, no matter how hard he might try. The threat these words carry is not external, uttered from another firm standpoint, but it remains internal — even though it also strikes us as coming from another planet.

In his commentary on the story, Gilles Deleuze pinpoints this dimension very well, insisting that Bartleby’s formula affects the given situation by hollowing out an area of uncertainty, of the indeterminate, which efficiently erodes the determinations and delimitations within which it occurs.² But in contrast to Deleuze — who moves perhaps a bit too quickly in interpreting this indeterminate space in a heavily determined direction, filling it up with alternative “good-guy” figures (foreign language as opposed to domestic language, psychosis as opposed to neurosis, brotherhood as opposed to paternal hierarchy, and so on) — I would like to insist that this internal gap in “Bartleby” is immanent in its hollowness or emptiness, and it is precisely for this reason that it is also so efficient. In other words, it is important to insist on what seems to be a purely formal aspect of Bartleby’s sentence. It is a fact that Bartleby’s formula hollows out, within a given situation, a void or gap that radically affects the situation and transforms it from

within. Yet the power of this hollow space lies precisely in its appearing as a pure zone of indeterminacy, so to speak, with no positive (or alternative) content. If this is indeed related to the Deleuzian notion of becoming, as opposed to being (to what there is), then I am tempted to say that it is not so much the realm of becoming as it is its transcendental condition. It is the cut in being that opens up the possibility of something other or different, without already being, in itself, this something different. The effect of Bartleby's formula consists first and foremost in that it cracks, from the inside, a very fixed and fortified situation, forces it apart, somewhat like an air-bubble that finds itself lodged within some dense material. It does not emerge as an alternative to the given situation, as another possibility; instead, it consists merely in creating an empty space within the given situation, creating a place that functions most explosively in the bare fact of its existence. There is something about Bartleby's words that strikes us as having a sort of pendulum effect, that is, as something that swings back and forth (*I would prefer...not to*) and, with this very swing, pries apart the immediate connection of cause and effect, or the given sequence of the elements of being.

In this sense, it could be argued that the genius of Bartleby's/Melville's formula resides in the fact that it realizes, concretely, another equally famous formula (which has the status more of a "program"), namely Mallarmé's "*rien n'aura eu lieu que le lieu*" — only the place itself will have taken place. What happens, or takes place, when Bartleby utters his "I would prefer not to"? What takes place is precisely the place itself: no positive content, nothing directly visible, palpable, or describable — and yet something does take place. The event consists here in the emergence of a place, a tiny little space, not much bigger than a crack, which is nonetheless endowed with a strange and disarming power.

But what exactly makes it possible for these innocent words to hollow out this space of the indeterminate, this no man's land within a territory that has all its parcels neatly marked out, determined, and attributed (everybody knows his or her place and the task that comes with it)? As I pointed out above, we are not dealing here simply with a rebellion, in the sense of a demand for a new and different distribution of the ownership of these parcels, as well as the social status that comes with them. Bartleby is immediately assigned his place, clearly delimited by the folding screen, and there is nothing to suggest that he wants some other place, a different, better, bigger one. On the contrary, he wants only to stay there. The problem, however, is that every place is bound up with a certain function; it is always already a symbolic place, and there is no such thing as a pure place, free of all symbolic ties. But Bartleby, as it becomes increasingly clear throughout the course of the story, could be described as someone who wants (and eventually creates) a place precisely without the symbolic, with no determinations, without any function or specific qualities: a pure place — place as such. It is not simply that he wants to be there, in the office, without doing anything. He is not a shirker; he does not want to be paid without doing any work, nor does he even want to be paid. It is also clear that he is not simply looking for a roof over his head (as the narrator mistakenly assumes at first); indeed, he is not a homeless man looking for shelter. No, Bartleby wants a place in a much more emphatic sense of the word. He does not want this or that place; instead,

he wants place as such, the very *placeness* of a place, if one may say so. More precisely, with his formula and attitude, he is himself already this place that *takes* place. For Bartleby is, finally, nothing else but his sentence; he is not someone using this sentence for a specific purpose. Moreover, the sentence *itself* is not an expression of his attitude, convictions, or standpoint — on the contrary, it is rather that his *actions* and *attitude* are (nothing but) expressions of this sentence. The real of Bartleby — all his consistency, including the void he creates within the symbolic — is already there in this sentence. Let us therefore return to it and ask once more about that which constitutes its inherent power.

To a very simple demand, related to his work as a scrivener, Bartleby replies, “I would prefer not to.” Why does this formula so confuse its addressee, the narrator of the story? To begin with, it is on account of the manner in which it is uttered:

I looked at him steadfastly. His face was leanly composed; his gray eye dimly calm. Not a wrinkle of agitation rippled him. Had there been the least uneasiness, anger, impatience or impertinence in his manner; in other words, had there been any thing ordinarily human about him, doubtless I should have violently dismissed him from the premises. But as it was, I should have as soon thought of turning my pale plaster-of-paris bust of Cicero out of doors. I stood gazing at him awhile, as he went on with his own writing, and then reseated myself at my desk. This is very strange, thought I. What had one best do? But my business hurried me: I concluded to forget the matter for the present, reserving it for my future leisure. So calling Nippers from the other room, the paper was speedily examined.³

This curious and rather inhuman absence of emotion is surely very important to the whole story. It prevents us from filling in the gap opened up by Bartleby’s strange sentence with this or that affect and thus from giving it some sort of meaning. At the same time, this absence of any emotional investment and personal note is rather at odds with the formulation itself, which does convey a personal note, namely the speaker’s preferential engagement (*I would prefer...*), such that the formula takes on an additional and almost ceremonial ring by virtue of the affective hollowness inside it. As a refusal — that is, all things considered, the formula’s clearest implication — it is strangely longwinded. It seems like a sort of *negatio extensa*, an extensive, space-occupying negation, which not only takes its time but also seems to take its space. It starts with a huge swing, with which it forces the space apart, which is actually a pure affirmation: *I would prefer...* This affirmative swing ends surprisingly in a negation, which turns out to be the true and only object of the affirmation, for this is precisely what is at stake. Written a bit differently, the sentence would not be “I don’t want to examine the copies,” but rather, “I want to not-examine the copies.” This might explain the often noted impression that there is something wrong with Bartleby’s sentence (in spite of its being syntactically correct) and that it would be more appropriate to say “I’d rather not,” as opposed to “I would prefer not to.” Yet the point is, of course, that these two formulations speak of two different things and are not simply two formulations of one and the same thing. “I don’t want to write” is not the same as

“I want to not-write” — and by spelling things out this way we can already see the difference. It is precisely the difference Kant conceptualizes as the difference between negative and indefinite/infinite judgement or, as Slavoj Žižek has frequently commented, the difference between simple negation (“the soul is not mortal”) and the affirmation of a non-predicate (“the soul is non-mortal”).⁴ Žižek likes to link this to the universe of Stephen King’s novels and to the difference between “he is not dead” and “he is un-dead,” pointing out that the indefinite judgement has the effect of opening up a third domain that undermines the underlying distinction: The un-dead are neither dead nor alive; they are precisely the “living dead.” The judgement “he is un-dead” is an indefinite-limiting judgement in the sense of a purely negative gesture of excluding a creature, say a vampire, from the domain of the dead, without situating it, for that reason, in the domain of the living (as in the case of the simple negation “he is not dead”).

In a different register, Bartleby’s formula does not simply refuse or negate a certain action; rather, it affirms its negation. And its effect is precisely that of opening up a third domain that undermines the fundamental distinction that orients his (and not only his) world. Bartleby’s boss feels this difference, this different nuance, but he does not understand it. He wants to make Bartleby say that he *does not want* (to do all these things that start pilling up), but he has little success. Take the following example (the emphases are Melville’s):

“Bartleby,” said I, “Ginger Nut is away; just step round to the Post Office, won’t you? (it was but a three minutes’ walk), and see if there is anything for me.”

“I would prefer not to.”

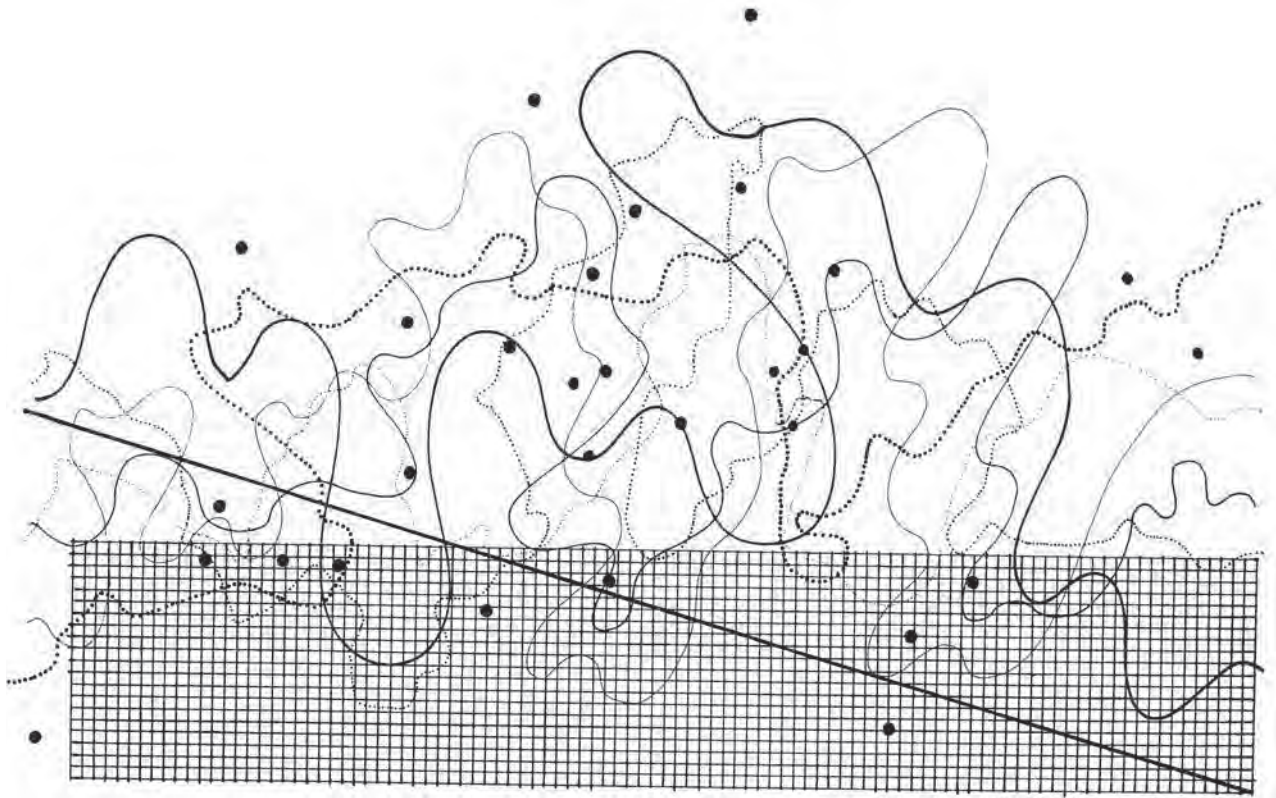
“You *will* not?”

“I *prefer* not.”⁵

Bartleby remains unshakable. This whole scenario is not about his not wanting to examine the copies, not wanting to go to the post office, and so on; rather, it is about his wanting to not-examine the copies, his wanting to not-go to the post office — he sticks with his indefinite judgement. This way he persistently erodes the reality that logically falls into two parts, affirmation and negation, which is exhausted by this alternative. Affirmation of the non-predicate is an indefinite or infinite judgement, since it does not imply any conclusion as to where, in the infinite space of what remains outside the domain delimited by what is negated, its object lies. Not-examining the copies is not the opposite of examining the copies; it is rather its infinite other, which is to say that it includes a possibly infinite or indefinite set of everything else. And, as a matter of fact, we can see how this indefinite mode is fatally inscribed in Bartleby’s story as an indefinite set of actions suggested to him that slide, one after another, into its abyss.

We could indeed say that Bartleby himself is nothing else but this mysterious “predicative ‘no’” (as affirmation of negation); his being merges with it to the extent that it contaminates every single action he is asked to perform and every single thing he is offered. Deleuze already made this point: From the

moment Bartleby first utters this sentence, and thus opens up or activates this curious, uncertain zone, he finds himself in an impossible position. He cannot prevent the fact that every word addressed to him — be it a demand, an offer, or a gift — falls or slides into this zone and is swallowed up by it. For this is precisely what the structure of infinite judgement implies. This contamination finally extends to the offer of food when he is already in jail: “I prefer not to dine to-day.”⁶ At the same time, this element of (non)nutrition further underlines the emptiness or void that gives Bartleby his very consistency. In the end, he will hollow himself out, as he has already hollowed out the reality around him, and become a pure place. Perhaps he becomes (if we accept Melville’s somewhat allegorical epilogue) that very pure place that is ultimately the only real addressee of those letters that never arrive at their destination, that is, “dead letters.”⁷ Or, if we go a step further, he becomes a pure place that serves as a reminder that this void in the Other is eventually the only real addressee of all letters, including those that do arrive at their destination.



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1. Herman Melville, "Bartleby," in *Billy Budd, Sailor, and Other Stories* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 13.
2. Gilles Deleuze, "Bartleby; or, The Formula," in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
3. Melville, "Bartleby," in *Billy Budd, Sailor, and Other Stories*, 13-14.
4. See, for example, Slavoj Žižek, "On Radical Evil and Related Matters," in *Tarrying with the Negative* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 83-124.
5. Melville, "Bartleby," in *Billy Budd, Sailor, and Other Stories*, 19.
6. *Ibid.*, 44.
7. *Ibid.*, 46.





THE AESTHETIC UNCONSCIOUS

jacques rancière

(Malden: Polity Press, 2009), 84 pp.

Translations of Jacques Rancière's work have been appearing regularly for the past decade and almost all of which are on the topics of aesthetics and politics. In *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, Rancière identifies the two-fold oppositional front, or "ethical couple," that necessitates his polemical vindication of aesthetics: Art today is split between "the ethical couple of a community art dedicated to restoring the social bond and an art bearing witness to the irremediable catastrophe lying at the very origin of that bond."¹ These two positions claim that aesthetics can result only in utopian excess, social blindness, and the discursive corruption of the singularity of art. Rancière, on the contrary, insists that aesthetics does not name the source of these problems but the regime of thinking that knots them together. Art is thought only at the place of non-thought; it is made visible only when its form is erased, signifying only when felt. Art is political because it "consists in reconfiguring the distribution of the sensible," but the political gesture cannot itself be inscribed in the sensible.² Art is singular because it breaks with regulatory regimes of representation, but this singularity cannot itself be exposed without a formal semblance. These paradoxes are the foundational core of aesthetics.

The formulation of the title *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* goes beyond a simple adoption of the scandal and profundity of Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Like Freud, Rancière seeks to demonstrate how the latter term (*Discontents*) does not refer to some superficial symptom that,

once properly identified, can be gotten rid of; rather, it refers to the constitutive element of the former (*Aesthetics*). Rancière's titular repetition announces a silent solidarity with and an intellectual debt to Freud.

And yet the psychoanalytic logic that informs this topological relation is not elaborated in this or any other recent book — *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics, The Politics of Aesthetics, The Emancipated Spectator, The Future of the Image* — save for one, *The Aesthetic Unconscious*. Originally delivered as two lectures in 2000, *The Aesthetic Unconscious* was developed before the publication of many of Rancière's more recent books, but it was translated and released only in 2009. Significantly, this text never engages a discussion of politics. The reader thus faces a trade-off: either tacit psychoanalysis and overt politics or overt psychoanalysis and tacit politics. This is not so much a limitation as a new possibility. How can we reconcile the politics inherent in art with the "aesthetic unconscious" implicitly evoked and contested in psychoanalysis? More specifically, we are led to ask what the political stakes are for today's psychoanalytic critics of literature and art.

Rancière begins *The Aesthetic Unconscious* with a disclaimer. He will psychoanalyze neither art nor Freud as he discusses art. Instead, he will try to demonstrate how Freud's readings of certain artworks and literary texts bear witness to a mode of thought that serves as a partial condition for the emergence of the clinical concept of the unconscious. Rancière calls this condition the "aesthetic unconscious." The claim is not, however, causal or archeological. He is not saying that the unconscious logic developed by the German Romantics and Idealists determined the precise sub-

jective organization that enable Freud to theorize psychoanalysis' central concept. Rather, Rancière argues, "if it was possible for Freud to formulate the psychoanalytic concept of the unconscious, it was because an unconscious mode of thought had already been identified outside of the clinical domain as such, and the domain of art and literature can be defined as the privileged ground where this 'unconscious' is at work" (4). The latter unconscious is defined by the regime of thinking art as the identity of thought and non-thought, the visible and the invisible, *logos* and *pathos*. Aesthetics allows art to exist in the singularity of its experience as a rupture with the standards of representation. At the same time, it is also the discourse that takes up the question of this experience.

In chapters 2, 3, and 4, Rancière demonstrates how the "aesthetic unconscious" is not a universal given but a specific product of a historical moment. His examples of pre-aesthetic representational thinking are fitting: Corneille and Voltaire's re-writings of the Oedipus myth. Both authors wanted to put the tragic tale of Oedipus on stage but immediately ran into a problem. The rules of representation and decorum that dictated their dramatic practice disallowed the gruesome spectacle of Oedipus's self-blinding, the lack of a romantic plot, the implausible course of revelation, and so on. Thus, Rancière explains, the notion of incest was not an issue for the two playwrights — the real problem arises as a matter of representation, proportion, and the Aristotelian relation between that which is *said* and that which is *seen*.

The point here is that prior to the aesthetic revolution, the troubling alliance of *logos* and *pathos* in the myth of Oedipus was completely unsatisfactory. The Oedipus — or Hamlet — of the

aesthetic revolution, by contrast, is emblematic of this very ambiguity. Such a figure wants to know precisely what he does not want to know; he wants to do what he does not want to do: “This identity between knowing and not knowing, between activity and passivity, is the very fact of art in the aesthetic regime” (24). This new relation itself is then doubled because, as Rancière argues, there are two different forms of “mute speech” that comprise aesthetic thought. The first is characterized by the notion that, quoting Novalis, “everything speaks” (34). Because “everything speaks” — and not just the normative, positive language of the voice — an interpreter is necessary to bring these unheard signs and formerly insignificant details into the fold of signification. The second form of “mute speech” has less to do with the world of silent signifiers and more to do with unconscious speech that attests to a total resistance to signification, a void against which all meaning struggles. The first form of “mute speech” is expressed in the *logos* of *pathos* (the signs that point to a mythological expanse of language, or more simply, *writing*), whereas the second is expressed in the *pathos* of *logos* (“the pure reproduction of the meaninglessness of life”) (39). These two aesthetic directions are heterogeneous but inseparable; both emerge at the crisis of representation, but one seeks to represent the elements of crisis (and not simply dismiss them), while the other seeks out the crisis as that which is completely unrepresentable.

The rest of this short book (chapters 5–8) is dedicated exclusively to Freud and his treatment of various works of art and literature: Jensen’s *Gradiva*, Hoffman’s *Sandman*, Ibsen’s *Rosmersholm*, and Michelangelo’s *Moses*. As Rancière states unambiguously, “Freud’s approach to art is not in the least motivated by a desire to demystify the sub-

limities of poetry and art and reduce them to the sexual economy of the drives” (49). While Freud is not interested in the “sexual etiology” of the work, he is still concerned with the biographies of the various artists and authors he reads (53). Rancière demonstrates skillfully that in order to avoid the naïve narrative of “sexual etiology” that so often accompanies biographism, Freud approaches the work in terms of its representational techniques and the regimes of visibility that legitimize or delegitimize them. Moreover, Freud’s engagement with art consistently privileges the first form of “mute speech”: “He wants to contribute to the victory of a hermeneutic and explanatory vocation of art over the nihilist entropy inherent in the aesthetic configuration of art” (54). To this end, Rancière argues that Freud often gives signification to the meaningless or ambiguous details of a work by referring to the creator’s childhood pathologies, or even by speculating about the prehistory of fictional characters. According to Rancière, Freud is so invested in the “good causal concatenation” of narrative and the restoration of *pathos* to *logos* that he often neglects to consider the threat posed by the nihilism of, for instance, Ibsen or Strindberg.

Rancière’s short book ends, appropriately, with the death drive. Freud’s preoccupation with the works in question occurs during the years of 1914–1915, before he really draws out the implications of the death drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Freud’s readings, therefore, “were so many ways of resisting the nihilist entropy that [he] detects and rejects in the works of the aesthetic regime of art, but that he will also legitimize in his theorization of the death drive” (83). Psychoanalysis, seen in this light, recognizes the two-fold positions of the “aesthetic unconscious,” albeit through a play of tension and transformation. Freud needed the “nihilist entropy”

of the drive but only to the extent that he could rein in its destructive force. Rancière ends by noting the nihilist tendencies of today's Freudian thinkers of art and literature. In rejecting the biographism and causal necessity of Freud, these figures draw on the power of the singular experience of the death drive. In so doing, they also reject aesthetics. This double rejection, according to Rancière, entails a contradiction. He argues that in refusing aesthetics, today's theorists unwittingly privilege one specific approach to aesthetics, namely the entropic aspect of "mute speech." They do not recognize that their work constitutes the flipside of Freud's hermeneutics, nor that it is unavoidably bound to the "aesthetic unconscious" that conditions their psychoanalytically informed critique.

The Aesthetic Unconscious deftly and convincingly connects the central insights of Freudian psychoanalysis to the contested legacy of the aesthetic regime. Alongside the other adjectival modifiers of the unconscious — "cultural," "juridical," and "political" — Rancière's "aesthetic unconscious" is an essential addition to this list. But beyond his superlative scholarship and artistico-literary acumen, this book's subtlety mounts a challenge. Today's Freudian critics, in privileging the void of the drive, represent the second ethical position of the "ethical couple" articulated by Rancière in *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*: "a community art dedicated to restoring the social bond and an art bearing witness to the irremediable catastrophe lying at the very origin of that bond."³ For instance, Lyotard and Badiou, their many differences notwithstanding, accuse aesthetics of an essential confusion that their respective positions avoid: Lyotard locates the experience of art in a sublime prostration before the Other, and Badiou dismisses aesthetics

in the name of the singular experience of the event. It can be argued that Lyotard is more of a catastrophist than Badiou, but in either case we see the rejection of aesthetics and the valorization of the drive over the first form of "mute speech," which attempts to articulate and make visible the insignificant traces to be found everywhere. No corrective, however, is forthcoming. Rancière does not prescribe a Freudian approach that would suture the split at the heart of the aesthetic/psychoanalytic regime. Because this antagonism is formative and inherent, a prescription may not be possible. But, if all art is political in its ability to "redistribute the sensible," then the stakes are extremely high.

— Matthew J. Rigilano

1. Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Malden: Polity Press, 2009), 130.
2. *Ibid.*, 25.
3. *Ibid.*, 130.

HURLY-BURLY NO. 2

(Paris: New Lacanian School, November 2009), 239 pp.



In “Introduction de *Scilicet*,” Lacan explains that he named the journal of the *École freudienne de Paris* (EFP) “*Scilicet*” — a word derived from the Latin words *scire licet*, meaning “it is permitted to know” — to make it abundantly clear that “you can know,”¹ that *you*, in the “empire of pedantry,”² can know how analysis operates, and this is the ambition of *Hurly-Burly*, the International Lacanian Journal of Psychoanalysis and a publication of the New Lacanian School (NLS): “You can know how analysis operates” (7).³ You can know, as Anne Lysy-Stevens affirms in her editorial to the second issue, but this knowledge is not primarily a matter of theory or technique; in Seminar XI, for instance, Lacan describes psychoanalysis as a “praxis,” “a concerted human action [...] [that] places man in a position to treat the real by the symbolic.”⁴ In contrast to scientific discourse, in which the desire of the scientist is not called into question, the desire of the analyst cannot be ignored, “for the simple reason that the problem of the training [*formation*] of the analyst poses it.”⁵ The knowledge at stake in psychoanalysis — in “how it operates” and, more specifically, in how it operates with words and sense to treat the real — is a know-how (*savoir-faire*) that pertains, above all, to an experience and the efficacy of the clinic: “The impact of words, to become an analyst: these are the two major axes of this issue; they are also two constant preoccupations of Lacan’s teaching” (7).

The title of the journal is an allusion to the enigmatic opening lines of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*:

First Witch: When shall we three meet again?
In thunder, lightning, or in rain?

Second Witch: When the hurly-burly's done,
When the battle's lost and won.⁶

What does “hurly-burly” mean here, in the world in which the three witches inhabit, and for the subject of the interpretation? The eternal temptation of applied psychoanalysis is to interpret such writing as a symptom of the writer’s unconscious ($S_1 \rightarrow S_2$), but for all the ingenuity of this approach it cannot avoid reproducing the *hurly-burly* of interpretation, the interpretation that — as Jacques-Alain Miller elucidates in his seminal “Interpretation in Reverse,”⁷ and as several brief but brilliant communications delivered at the VIIth Congress of the NLS develop in the pages of this issue⁸ — is the unconscious itself. To interpret “hurly-burly” is to reproduce the *hurly-burly* of interpretation; it is to interpret in the service of the pleasure principle, the principle of interminable analysis. What, then, is the other side of interpretation, interpretation beyond the pleasure principle? In Seminar XXIV, Lacan suggests it is an interpretation with an affinity for poetry: “Meaning acts as a blotter [*Le sens, ça tamponne*]. But with the help of what they call poetic writing you can get to the dimension of what analytic interpretation might be.”⁹ Inasmuch as poetic writing is not itself an interpretation of the unconscious — it is not possible, after all, to separate what Shakespeare wanted to say from what he actually said — it is, in effect, like the analytic cut, a form of equivocation that brings the subject of reading back to perplexity ($S_2 // S_1$) as the elementary phenomena of the subject in language (*lalangue*). As Miller asks rhetorically in a talk published under the title “The Warsaw Lecture,” “How are the analyst’s words

to be furnished with a power comparable to the words that fixed down the subject’s jouissance?” (177) This — “the most crucial question for psychoanalytic practice today” — is the question of *Hurly-Burly*, “unsubscribed from the unconscious [*désabonné à l’inconscient*].”¹⁰

In “On Lacan’s Remarks on Chinese Poetry in Seminar XXIV,” Adrian Price offers an incisive close reading of Lacan’s more abstruse remarks on Chinese poetry that, with the help of Miller’s exegesis, theorizes poetry and, in particular, its function in analytic interpretation. As Lacan himself observes, poetry “appears to stem from the signifier’s relation to the signified,” and this leads him to approach poetry in terms of the *imaginarily symbolic*.¹¹ To clarify this approach Price distinguishes between the *symbolically real* and the *really symbolic*: Insofar as the former refers to the presence of the real in the symbolic (“When this real appears in the symbolic it appears as anxiety” [197]), the latter refers to the symbolic in — or, more precisely, in conformity with — the real, that is, the lie that “always comes back to the same place”¹² and that is closely related to the symptom (“the symptom is the effect of the symbolic in the real”).¹³ Price follows Miller in situating poetry between the *symbolically real* and the *really symbolic* to the extent that it is “doubly articulated,” producing a “meaning effect” on the side of the *really symbolic* and a “truth effect” on the side of the *symbolically real*: “More *varité* than *vérité*, it is not truth as such, but an effect, one amongst others, that mediates between meaning and the *symbolically real*” (198).¹⁴ This truth effect is the *imaginarily symbolic* dimension of poetic writing — from whatever tradition — that, as Lacan puts it, “can get to the dimension of what analytic interpretation might be”: “It’s insofar as a

correct interpretation puts paid to a symptom [*une interprétation juste éteint un symptôme*] that truth is specified as being poetic.”¹⁵ You can indeed know how analytic interpretation operates reading *Hurly-Burly*, and it is not without know-how in relation to the truth effect of poetic writing.

You can also know how analytic training operates, thanks in part to Bernard Seynhaeve’s testimony of the pass and Éric Laurent’s highly instructive engagement with Seynhaeve’s text.¹⁶ In “A Stop, An End, or a Denouement?” Marie-Hélène Brousse calls attention to the temporal dimension of the analytic experience — foregrounded in “When the Cure Stops...,” the title of the Paris English Seminar (PES) in 2009 — to differentiate between endings in analysis: “There are stops, there are ends, and there are ends which are denouements” (74).¹⁷ If a stop denotes a short session, and an end signifies an exit from the analytic discourse, a denouement — a term she borrows from an analysand who is a theater director — is an end in which the subject remains within the analytic discourse: “I propose that the difference between a therapeutic end to analysis and a ‘didactic’ end is that the first is really an end, and the second is a denouement” (76). An end involving a passage from analysand to analyst is a didactic end, and unlike an exclusively therapeutic end, in which the subject remains in the same dimension of language and speech, the analyst works continuously, at the denouement, with his or her *sinthome*, reading the unconscious:

In my experience [the unanalyzable] comes from the analysand. It comes from the difficulties you encounter in directing the treat-

ment, the point of failure of your analysand that you can attribute to yourself and not only to him. When that happens you have of course to do a short cycle again. But in my opinion it is not the same kind of analysis at that moment. It is not necessarily an analysis with an analyst. It is not necessarily a saying experience, but it is always a writing experience. It always has to be written. (75)

In Seminar XXI, Lacan defines writing as “the knowledge supposed to a subject [*le savoir supposé sujet*],”¹⁸ a strict reversal of his well-known formula “the subject supposed to know [*le sujet supposé savoir*],”¹⁹ and the *hurly-burly* of this chiasmus is at the denouement of analytic training: “The subject supposed to know, what does that mean [*Le supposé savoir, qu’est-ce que ça peut bien vouloir dire*]”? It’s the subject supposed to know how to read differently [*Le supposé savoir lire autrement*].”²⁰

In “How Analysis Operates,” Lysy-Stevens states explicitly that, as a reader of the second issue of *Hurly-Burly*, you can know how analysis operates, and this is no doubt the case, at least, that is, for the subject supposed to know how to read differently. It has become a cliché to point out that much of Lacan’s Seminar is still unpublished, that even less is available in translation, and that limited access to Miller’s teaching in North America makes it difficult to know how to read Lacan, to know how to read the later Lacan in particular, and to know how the teaching of the later Lacan is inscribed in contemporary psychoanalytic theory and practice

around the world. But if *Hurly-Burly* is essential reading — and, indeed, as Tom Svolos claims in his review of the first issue, “[it] is absolutely essential reading for anyone interested in psychoanalysis in the Lacanian orientation today”²¹ — it is not because it transmits knowledge of Lacan’s teaching or because it is an organ of the World Association of Psychoanalysis (WAP). If *Hurly-Burly* is essential reading it is because the experience of reading it produces effects that compel the subject of reading to confront an “I don’t want to know anything about it”²² that must be written. And you can know how to read this writing — differently.

— Joel Goldbach

1. Jacques Lacan, “Introduction de *Scilicet* au titre de la revue de l’École freudienne de Paris,” in *Autres écrits*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2001), 283.
2. *Ibid.*, 284.
3. For more information on the NLS visit <http://www.amp-nls.org>, and to purchase a copy of *Hurly-Burly* go to <http://www.ecf-echoppe.com>.
4. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 6.
5. *Ibid.*, 10.
6. William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, in *The Norton Shakespeare: Based on the Oxford Edition*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 1.1.1-4.
7. Jacques-Alain Miller, “Interpretation in Reverse,” in *The Later Lacan: An Introduction*, ed. Véronique Voruz and Bogdan Wolf (New York: The State University of New York Press, 2007), 3-9.
8. See Alexandre Stevens, “Lacanian Interpretation,” 41-44; Miller, “The Hurtful Word,” 45-49; and Éric Laurent, “A Fundamental Point of Departure,” 51-59. See also Victoria Woollard, “Interpretation and Truth,” 107-11, and Luc Vander Venet, “Interpreting the Silence,” 119-22.
9. Lacan, *L’insu que sait de l’une-bévue, s’aile à mourre* (1976-1977), unpublished seminar, 18 April 1977.
10. Lacan, “Joyce le symptôme,” in *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XXIII: Le sinthome, 1975-1976*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2005), 164.
11. Lacan, *L’insu que sait de l’une-bévue, s’aile à mourre* (1976-1977), unpublished seminar, 15 March 1977.
12. Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 49.
13. Lacan, *R.S.I.* (1974-1975), unpublished seminar, 10 December 1974.
14. The neologism *varité* evokes the words “*vérité* [truth],” “*varié* [varied],” and “*variété* [variety],” no doubt to underscore the variations of truth in psychoanalysis and to undermine the notion that truth is grounded in the real. For more on this theme, see Pawel Dybel, “Truth in Psycho-

- analysis,” 179-83, and Woollard, “Interpretation and Truth,” 107-11.
15. Lacan, *L’insu que sait de l’une-bévue, s’aile à mourre* (1976-1977), unpublished seminar, 18 April 1977.
 16. Bernard Seynhaeve, “An Act of Saying That Holds Up In and Of Itself,” 89-95, and Laurent, “The Pass... or to Finesse Against the Subject Supposed to Know,” 79-88.
 17. See also Neus Carbonell, “When the Cure Stops... Where it Could Have Begun,” 99-105; Vicente Palomera, “When Freud’s Cures Stopped, The Rat Man ‘Wishing One’s Life Away,’” 153-58; and Jean-Pierre Klotz, “On Some Ways to ‘Stop and Go’ With Analytic Treatment,” 159-65.
 18. Lacan, *Les non-dupes errent* (1973-1974), unpublished seminar, 9 April 1974.
 19. Lacan, *L’identification* (1961-1962), unpublished seminar, 15 November 1961.
 20. Lacan, *Le moment de conclure* (1977-1978), unpublished seminar, 10 January 1978.
 21. Tom Svolos, “On Reading Hurly Burly,” in *Lacanian Compass* 1.14 (16 October 2009): 45.
 22. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: Encore, On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972-1973*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 1.

EROS AND ETHICS: READING JACQUES LACAN’S SEMINAR VII

marc de kesel

(Albany: The State University of New York Press, 2009), 364 pp.

At the symposium on structuralism at Johns Hopkins University in October 1966, Lacan reportedly told Derrida of the two anxieties afflicting him at the time. First, he wondered how he would be read after he died and, second, he worried that the binding of his 900 page *Écrits* would not be strong enough and that it would fall to pieces. “You watch,” he said, gesturing with his hands, “it won’t hold.”¹ These anxieties, concerned as they are with keeping things together and the proliferation of interpretations to which all proper events give rise, seem to have been cured by the University. The contradictions and antagonisms so central to the movement of psychoanalytic invention have been excised, as the pious myth of legitimate Lacanian theory writes its history in the future perfect tense, thereby anaesthetizing the corpus of any improper deviations. The possibility that the binding will not hold and that its pieces will be fashioned according to a multiplicity of logics seems to have been foreclosed in advance by reducing the movement of Lacanian theory to a systematic elaboration of concepts stable enough to be taken in hand, instrumentalized, and put to work in the service of whatever task lies before the operator. This is the official version, and it will hold, so says every new publication of a seminar. In clear opposition to the ceaseless task of reproducing the authoritative Lacan, Marc De Kesel’s excellent *Eros and Ethics* lays bare the inconsistencies, historical specificity, and demonstrable novelty of Lacan’s invention while, at the same time, insisting that the threads

binding Lacan's teaching together are liable to snap, that everything might fall to pieces, rendering the dumb, inert material unifying this discourse plain for all to see.

The "tensions and knots" De Kesel aims to "clarify" and "illuminate" in *Eros and Ethics* are the unacknowledged "impasses and aporias" that have been either covered up by the reductive syntheses of Lacanian executioners or simply excised from the record by suppressing deviant editions of Lacan's work (8). It is the ceaseless tightening of these knots that have kept the binding of Lacan's writing (and its transmission) in good order. This is an occupation for which De Kesel seems particularly unsuited, as he subtly critiques the union into which certain Lacanian orthodoxies claim to have "tied the knot" with the one and true Lacan. Instead, *Eros and Ethics*, the first extended interrogation of Seminar VII in English, offers what might be called a "pirated" reading of the seminar, a sustained interrogation of the conjuncture of Eros and ethics that is as erudite as it is accessible and whose crystallization is a welcome contribution to a field that threatens to capsize under the weight of so many feet toeing the official party line.

The terrain upon which *Eros and Ethics* performs its "archaeological" work is both banal and novel. On the one hand, its method of analysis is unrepentantly classical, insofar as it is closer to an *explication de texte* than a cultural reading that passes Lacan through the sieve of popular culture; on the other, by reading Lacan against both himself and the traditions with which he is associated, it produces an effect akin to telescoping, wherein the novelty of the Lacanian intervention is constantly called into question, folded back into the historical continuum of inheritance and influ-

ence so loved by genetic accounts, only to then be ripped out of its context in order to demonstrate its originality with patient care. *Eros and Ethics* pans from the oftentimes "inexcusably substandard" (7) editions approved by Jacques-Alain Miller to the "reliable" (283) pirated editions with a steady hand, as it registers the kinship between Lacan and his interlocutors (Maurice Bouvet, Bentham, Aristotle, Kant, Simone Weil, Augustine, Freud), in order to establish a fundamental *distance* between these partners and Lacan's restaging of the Freudian *skandalon*.

According to De Kesel, the "stakes and themes" (9) of Seminar VII are anchored in Seminar VI, necessitating that we tarry with the so-called radical break between the early and late Lacan, said to pivot around the introduction of *das Ding*. We might say, then, that the stakes of *Eros and Ethics* reside within the suspension of such a break — or, more precisely, *Eros and Ethics* stands or falls with its attempt to reinstall Lacan within the problematics of object-relations theory and the "ethics of distance," which Lacan himself derided as "worthless for thinking the relation with the object" (282). While *Eros and Ethics* stresses the sharp lines of demarcation separating Lacan from object-relations theorists like Bouvet (one cannot "approach the ego and the object as ordinary, *real* qualities" [20] as Bouvet does) and Klein (sublimation is not, as Klein claims, a "*reparation* of the object" [172]), De Kesel nevertheless maintains that Lacan "has always moved *within* the same paradigm of the diverse object-relations theories of his time" (12) and that the crucial *emphatic* turns introduced by Lacan in Seminar VII are best understood by viewing Lacan as an object-relations theorist, albeit a "contrary and rebellious" one (21). This "artificial architecture" does not allow us to

collapse Lacan within the strictures of the object-relations problematic; on the contrary, it forces us to measure the decisive distance between the various seminars, and between Lacan and his fathers, both within psychoanalysis and without.

According to *Eros and Ethics*, the basic paradox of object-relations theory — the subject is both an object and the relation to this object — “gains adequate expression” (31) in Lacan, a paradox whose “fundamental impasse” must be “neutralized” (26) if Lacan is to depart from the company of his “moralizing” and “naturalizing” fathers. It is to De Kesel’s credit that the stakes of Lacan’s conceptual invention can now be brought into sharp relief; the detours that saturate *Eros and Ethics* demonstrate the precise move required for psychoanalysis to break ranks with both its tradition and its contemporaries. De Kesel’s telescopic method claims that, for example, Lacan would “hardly have changed the classical ethical paradigms” (43) had he continued to “‘close’ the whole problematic of desire and its lack in on lack itself” (42), as he seems to do in Seminar VI, thereby sealing an unseemly alliance between psychoanalysis and the mystic Christianity of Simone Weil. It also claims that the primacy Lacan gives to the signifier in the Rome Discourses would have banished reality and brought him into near conformity with Bentham’s theory of fictions and its evacuation of the real, had he not reaffirmed Freud’s emphasis on the unconscious as *irreducible* to the symbolic by installing a “real” reality (70). De Kesel’s schematization of these minimal differences traces the countless permutations that, when taken together, compose a dossier on those who invest in the service of goods rather than following the Good to its limit — that is, to the real Thing at which jouissance aims.

It is from the perspective of this limit — the real — that Lacan pursues a logic that perverts nature at every turn, a psychoanalytic logic that operates under the sign of ethics. While *Eros and Ethics* makes it manifestly clear that psychoanalysis can establish an ethics of neither exemplary figures nor the Good, there is little reason to lament its lack of invention with regard to ethics, as Lacan does a propos of perversion: “You heard me very often claim that psychoanalysis did not even invent a new perversion. It is sad. If perversion is man’s essence, what an infertility in that practice!”² While it is, of course, impossible to establish a general rule to manage the game of polymorphously-perverse subjects, there nevertheless remains, according to De Kesel, a fundamentally rigorous and terrible virtue to an ethics of psychoanalysis — it leaves open “the paradoxical possibility that one can consciously confront the domain in which one usually disappears” (267), that “evil” at which we secretly aim, by keeping “the *real* reality at a distance” (82).

— Ryan Crawford

1. Elizabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 319.
2. Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XXIII: Le sinthome, 1975-1976*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2005), 153.

THE AMERICAN OPTIC: PSYCHOANALYSIS, CRITICAL RACE THEORY, AND RICHARD WRIGHT

mikko tuhkanen

(Albany: The State University of New York Press, 2009), 229 pp.

Recently a friend and colleague of mine at the University at Buffalo encountered a fellow graduate student at a bar who asked him whether or not those of us working at The Center for the Study of Psychoanalysis and Culture “knew that [we] were all white.” Frustrated by the unvarnished cynicism of this provocation, my friend quickly redirected the conversation to another topic. I, however, would like to consider her question a bit more carefully, because I think it neatly condenses and forces us to confront several important issues that currently challenge us in the American academy, particularly as students and teachers of psychoanalysis who work in the midst of a seemingly endless process of fragmentation into compartmentalized academic specializations that rarely engage one another meaningfully, despite the din of appeals for interdisciplinarity coming from all sides. Indeed, the brief exchange this student had with my friend constitutes what is, I suspect, the only real dialogue that has ever taken place at this university between the Department of African and African American Studies (where the inquiring student works) and The Center. In addition to indicating a general dearth of scholarly exchange between psychoanalysis and its many others, this question points to an even more critical problem of knowing — of knowing one’s “race” — and to the structural limits that may or may not bar this knowledge within a particular discourse. Do they know that they are all white, those people in The

Center? Do they know... well, do they know that psychoanalysis is white? In specifically psychoanalytic terms that broaden the implications of this question, we might ask how it happens, within a symbolic order that is historically structured and hierarchized by the (empty) concept of “race,” that a subject is compelled to confront the “fact” of its own “whiteness,” “blackness,” and so on.

Mikko Tuhkanen’s book, *The American Optic: Psychoanalysis, Critical Race Theory, and Richard Wright* directly confronts and takes a significant step toward answering the cluster of concerns that seem to be lurking behind this question. Via a psychoanalytic account of how the “racialized” subject is constituted, in what he calls “the white symbolic order,” through the scopic drive, Tuhkanen argues for a shift in our thinking of race that would allow us, finally, to begin to understand why it “remains an indelible category of identification and politics even after critical race theory has demonstrated the groundlessness of most racial categorizations” (xi-xii). By staging this conversation between psychoanalysis and critical race theory, *The American Optic* tests the latter’s apparent assumption that the racialized subject is wholly constituted by socio-historical contingencies. Against such an assumption, Tuhkanen inquires after what he terms the “ontological” dimension of racialization, although he is careful to clarify that this category should not be opposed to the contingent, that is, aligned with the “necessary” or with an essentialist notion of race. Rather, following a Lacanian understanding of the subject, he argues that this real ontology of the human being “opens a space for the subject’s ‘incalculability’ [...], premised on the unpredictable interventions of the unconscious and the real,” and that such a space further “opens the possibility of understand-

ing contingency and unpredictability as politically salient strategies” (xxii). His turn to African-American fiction is particularly appropriate to this project given its position within a history of racialized dispossession and its potential, as literature, to foster unpredictable, incalculable experiences of that history across racial and disciplinary lines. Here, I use the word “disciplinary” to designate not only discrete fields of academic specialization, but also the more nefarious (Foucauldian) notion that the modern subject is fixed within a panoptic field of historically contingent power relations. It is in opposition to the seeming totalization of this disciplinary gaze, according to Tuhkanen, that the “experience of the literary” provides a space for the production of alternate symbolic structures and is “described by slave narrators (and, following them, Du Bois and Wright) as providing an alienated distance from the Other’s nonnegotiable demands” (xxiv).

For Tuhkanen, Richard Wright’s work — particularly his autobiography, *Black Boy*, which is discussed in the final two chapters of *The American Optic* — actualizes this experience of the literary by affording perspectives beyond what he calls the “southern spectacles” of the white symbolic order (xxiii). Wright is, on this view, the writer of the American optic — Tuhkanen’s term (via Ralph Ellison) for the relation of race to visibility in the United States. Wright’s consistent attention to the question of point-of-view, in particular, prefigures not only many of critical race theory’s insights concerning the “ocularcentric” genealogy of the concept of race, but also much of Lacan’s work on the gaze, alienation, and *aphansis* in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. In this way, Wright’s texts provide Tuhkanen with an excellent terrain upon which these two disciplines might come to encounter each other productively.

As a first step toward cultivating this dialogue, Tuhkanen theorizes the white symbolic order as a rigid “societal and libidinal structure where racial difference is an organizing principle,” by considering Bigger Thomas’ various confrontations with the American imaginary in *Native Son*. His first and second chapters — “A [B]igger’s Place: The ‘Racial’ Subject in the White Symbolic Order” and “The Grimace of the Real: Of Paranoid Knowledge and Black(face) Magic” — explore Lacan’s mirror stage alongside his engagement with perspectival techniques in painting in order to address how Bigger’s act of murder temporarily opens the possibility of a strategic negotiation of invisibility and mobility, despite the dominance of the white gaze within which he is utterly transparent and fixed. Through a blackface mimicry of the “idiotic” role to which the white symbolic order has sutured him — a strategy Tuhkanen understands as a kind of paranoid imaginary identification, a risky and ambivalent *pharmakon* — Bigger relinquishes the primacy of his own perspective and, like the psychotic, “become[s] a nonprivileged point in the field of the other’s gaze, without distinct boundaries and coherence” (45). In this flattening out of the scopic field, Bigger is able to conceal himself right on the surface, while the novel’s well-meaning white characters search for some deeper hidden motive behind his actions (such as a Communist conspiracy or a plot by the establishment). Bigger’s deployment of this blackface mask thus affords him a position similar to that of the anamorphic skull in Hans Holbein’s *The Ambassadors*: Like the two male figures at the center of that painting, Bigger’s white sympathizers are trapped by a masterly perspective that renders them blind to the impossible blot that stains the very canvas on which they too are painted. Although this unreadability risks “condemning [Bigger] to an endless performance that responds to

the white symbolic fantasy” (101), Tuhkanen insists that we consider his structural position alongside that of the object *a*, in other words, as one that not only sustains but that also might radically undermine a symbolic order that organizes itself around the traumatic kernel of race.

It is a sustained attention to the object *a* that counterbalances Tuhkanen’s demand, following Tim Dean, for a “de-emphasis of the phallus,” a project that subtends the entirety of *The American Optic* and forms an absolutely crucial basis for the dialogue that it attempts to stage. For Tuhkanen, to follow the shift in Lacan’s thinking from the phallus to the object *a* is to open the applicability of psychoanalysis to considerations that heretofore extended beyond its main sphere of interest. If we assume, as Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks’ does in *Desiring Whiteness*, that a symbolic order can congeal not only around the phallic signifier, but also around something like the “master signifier of Whiteness” (99)¹ and, moreover, that the trauma of racialization can be as foundational as that of castration, then we can begin to recognize the many points of confluence that already inhere between psychoanalysis and critical race theory. What nevertheless differentiates Tuhkanen’s investigation of the American optic from Seshadri-Crooks’ analysis, in which the “regime of looking” consolidates the racialized subject’s symbolic position, is that his reading makes no attempt to avoid analogies between sexualization and racialization. Indeed, Tuhkanen rejects *Desiring Whiteness*’s foundational claim that the former is the only real difference. Given that Seshadri-Crooks’ important text seems to have all but settled the issue of what psychoanalysis might have to say about race, Tuhkanen’s particular emphasis on the real of racial difference

— formulated in his third chapter, “Unforeseeable Tragedies: Symbolic Change in Wright, Fanon, and Lacan” — is probably *The American Optic*’s most significant intervention.

Turning here to Frantz Fanon’s post-colonial work and Lacan’s articulation of sexual difference in Seminar XX, Tuhkanen undertakes a comparative reading of the “ethico-real act[s]” performed by “‘tragic’ female figures” like the veiled militants in Fanon’s “Algeria Unveiled” and Aunt Sue, Wright’s “unsuspected ‘mammy’” in the short story, “Bright and Morning Star” (88). Aligning them with Lacan’s Antigone and opposing them to instances of acting similar to the one explored in his assessment of *Native Son* — wherein Bigger’s minstrelsy operates as an imaginary identification that is perhaps “doomed to repeat the existing structures of symbolization” (101) — Tuhkanen reads these real acts of resistance as courting an Other jouissance that may elicit radical but unpredictable reconfigurations of the symbolic. He thus pinpoints in Wright’s fiction two ways of relating to the white symbolic order — one based on an imaginary (ego) identification and one that hinges on an identification with the real — that are more or less analogous to the ones delineated in Lacan’s formulas of sexualization.

Provocative as this analogy may be, however, in troubling the primacy of sexual difference in the Lacanian oeuvre, it may also court the risk of evacuating sexual difference of its clinical and theoretical specificity. This is precisely the type of move that Freud cautioned against when, for example, he departed with Jung over the latter’s insistence upon the generalization of libido as a catch-all for any form of psychic energy. Jung’s

“innovation,” Freud said, “was methodologically disputable, caused a great deal of confusion, [and] reduced the term ‘libido’ to the level of a superfluous synonym.”² My concern here is not so much with Tuhkanen’s methodology, which I find to be fairly sound, but with the potential confusion that might result from reducing both the terms “sex” and “race” to superfluous synonyms of one another. It is largely because I find Tuhkanen’s argument for the de-emphasis of the phallus in favor of the object a so compelling that I am, at the same time, apprehensive about whether an analogy with sexual difference may have the effect of divesting such a psychoanalytic theory of *racial difference* of its own specific potential. Although Tuhkanen asserts that the “graphs in *Seminar XX* [...] have significance beyond questions of sexual difference [and] also suggest how raced subjects are positioned in the symbolic” (98), his actual analysis of how Wright’s and Fanon’s examples of resistance and symbolic change “can be mapped onto the symbolic structures that emerge out of the impossibility that sexual difference names for Lacan” (95) can, at times, seem to repeat the very problem with which he would like to contend. Indeed, while he clearly insists that “we not limit ourselves to sexualization in considering the subjective structures impelled by the real that Lacan sketches in *Seminar XX*” (97), and further suggests that his study is concerned with “some of the most violent forms of the white symbolic order [wherein] *racial difference trumps sexual difference*” (101; emphasis added), Tuhkanen nevertheless quite explicitly asserts that the two forms of acting he explores in Wright, “like Fanon’s epidermalization and veiling, can be understood *only through the theory of sexualization*” (92; emphasis added). It is clear that it is the “unpredictable inextricability” of sex and race that

he wishes to emphasize above all. But, whereas this inextricability is fully evident in the careful attention he pays to sexual difference in “Algeria Unveiled,” Tuhkanen’s incorporation of sexualization into his reading of Wright’s “Bright and Morning Star” is more difficult to tease out. He is careful to articulate Aunt Sue’s acting like a “nigger woman” in (non-sexualized) terms of a radical act that, perhaps unlike Bigger’s blackface strategy, cannot possibly be reinscribed within the existing economy of the white symbolic order. However, his somewhat ambiguous problematization of Wright’s own gestures toward separating these two forms of resistance along the lines of femininity and masculinity respectively, suggests that his reading of “Bright and Morning Star” might actually confirm the primacy of sexual difference over racial difference. As a result of this confusion, Tuhkanen’s claim that “narratives of [racial] passing [...] are always implicated in questions of sexual difference” reads as though it is in agreement with Joan Copjec’s affirmation of the unique primacy of sex in *Read My Desire*: “It is always a sexed subject who assumes each racial, class, or ethnic identity” (98).³

I point to the confusion that ensues from this sexualized mapping of racial difference not in order to refute the inextricability of sex and race but in the hope that, even in psychoanalytic studies of race that are as thorough and convincing as *The American Optic*, the relationship between these two types of difference can be left as an open question. Leaving this question open solicits an answer that, as we might say in Tuhkanen’s terms, remains unpredictable and incalculable. Indeed, it is precisely the sovereign incalculability of the subject (and neither her race nor her sex) that Lacan always maintained in a position of the

utmost primacy, and it is in his repeated emphasis on this unpredictability that Tuhkanen is most attuned to the ethical stakes of psychoanalysis. One potential avenue of future scholarship along these lines might pursue recent Lacanian considerations of shame and guilt. Copjec, for example, has recently gestured toward what the distinction between these two affects implies for a psychoanalytic consideration of race and other categories of subjectivity that are not primarily sexual but do not, for that reason, pertain any less to the ontological question of the real:

The affects of shame and guilt are improperly used to define kinds of cultures; what they define, rather, are different relations to one's culture [that is,] to the form of life we inherit at birth (not our biological birth, but our birth into language), all those things — family, race, ethnicity, sex — we do not choose, but which choose us. [...] The manner in which we assume this inheritance, and the way we understand what it means to keep faith with it, are [...] what distinguishes shame from guilt.⁴

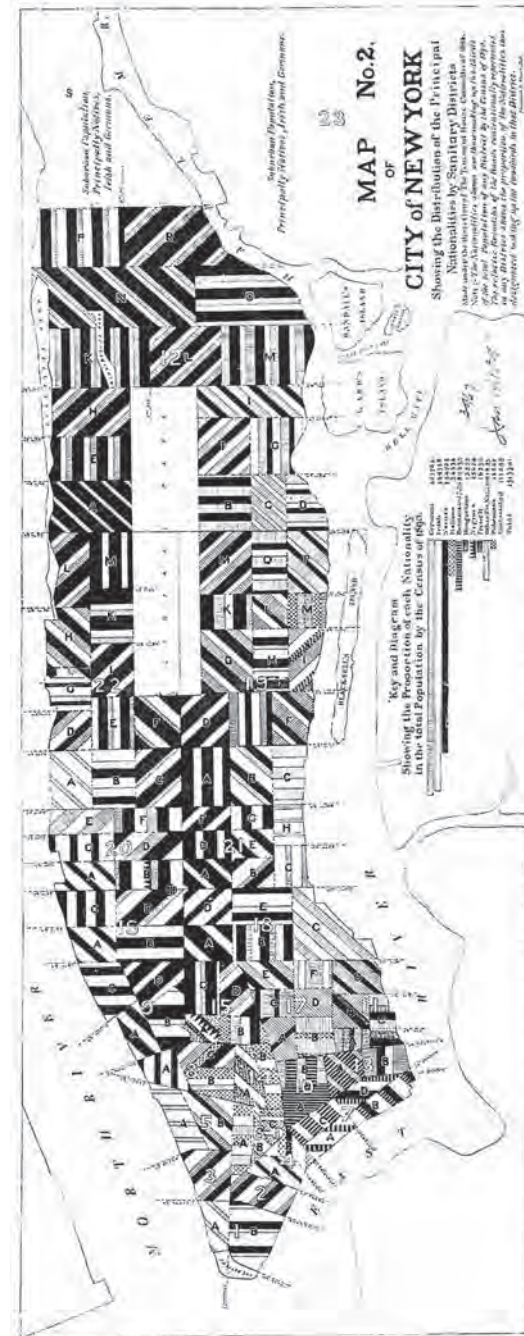
Often thinking this “inherited” difference on the basis of group identification — that is, in terms of the ego’s imaginary assumption of certain positivist racialized attributes — many interventions upon the question of race (Tuhkanen’s excluded) might be said to overdetermine the structure and economy of guilt, while overlooking the way in which shame can function to “dispossess the subject of that which it can never assume as property,” namely the point at which it is riveted to culture and his-

tory (and therefore race) in an always singular and essentially unassumable way.⁵ In the experience of shame I am not one with myself as an identity, but I come into contact with the “*intimate distance* that constitutes my sense of interiority, my sense of myself as subject.”⁶ While both affects result from an anxious encounter with one’s own unknowable jouissance, guilt, unlike shame, transforms this jouissance into one that fraudulently gives me the sense that it is possible to know, possess, or appropriate my unchosen inheritance — my race, in this case — as an identity.

What, then, if the question with which I began — “Do the students of psychoanalysis at the University at Buffalo know that they are all white?” — were considered less a provocation based on an existing, institutionally sustained racial antagonism, and more an invitation to test the limits of self-knowledge as they pertain to the history and scope of psychoanalysis? An injunction, in other words, for psychoanalysis and its students to have some shame? Might this injunction, by exposing psychoanalysis to the point at which it is riveted to a history and culture of colonialism and racist dispossession, provide new avenues for cross-disciplinary dispute, new investigations of the Freudian discovery and its implications for race and racism, or new and unpredictable strategies of political and critical intervention? While Tuhkanen does not organize his thought according to this precise division between shame and guilt, his insights invite just this kind of creative self-interrogation and might therefore inaugurate a new project of thinking the real of race via the question of affect.

— Lydia R. Kerr

1. See Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks, *Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian Analysis of Race* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 7.
2. Sigmund Freud, "Two Encyclopedia Articles," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey et al. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), 18:255.
3. Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994), 208.
4. Copjec, "The Censorship of Interiority," in *Umbr(a): Islam*, No. 1 (2009): 167.
5. *Ibid.*, 183.
6. *Ibid.*, 178.



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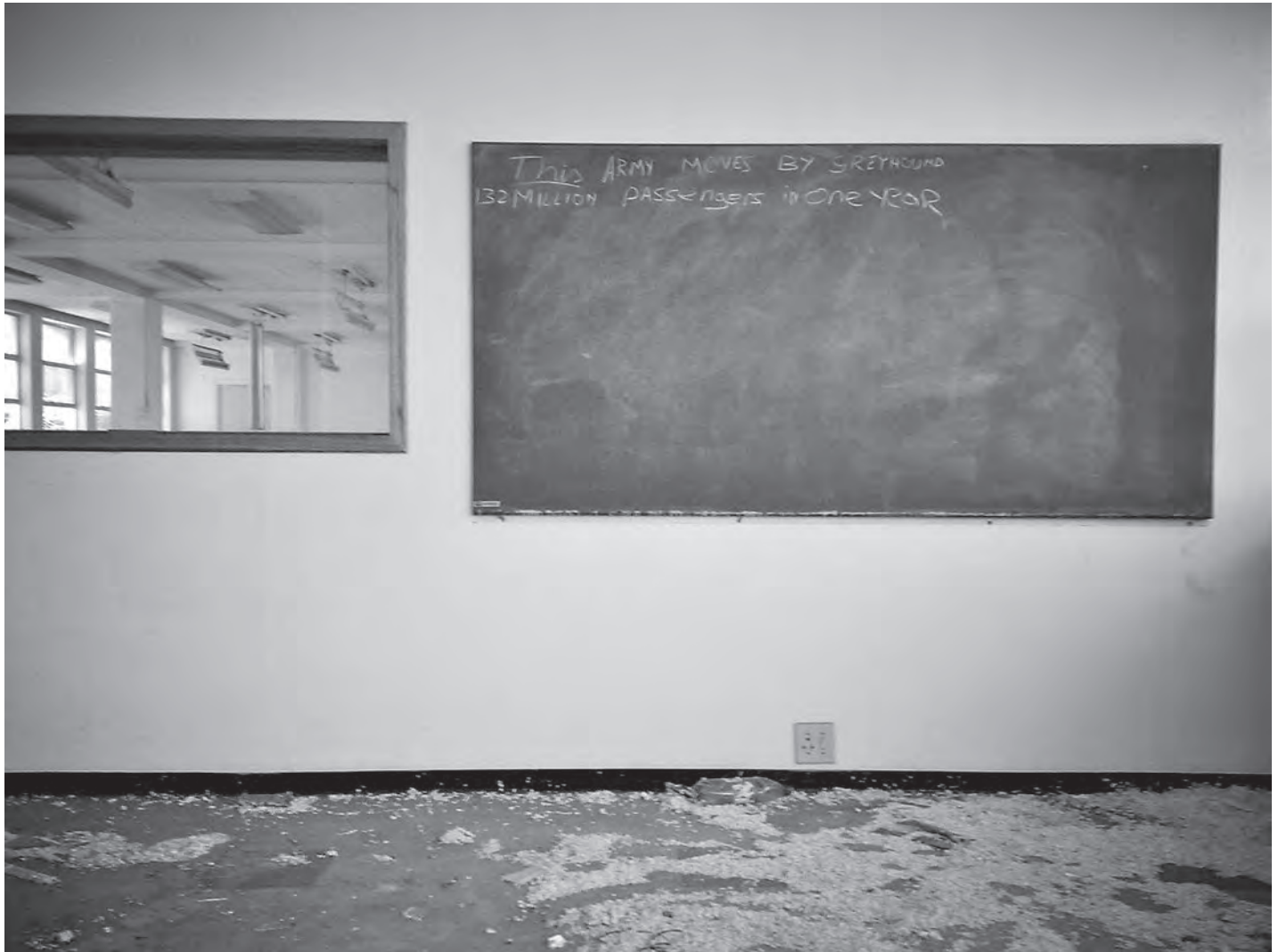
on a new project, tentatively entitled *Libertine Mathematics: Perversions of the Linguistic Turn*, which juxtaposes masterpieces of the libertine tradition with contemporary theoretical works that have embraced the language of mathematical formalization as an ultimate extension, rejection, or overturning of the so-called “linguistic turn” in twentieth century thought.

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