

## The Letter in Psychoanalytical Discourse - Between Mathemes and Art

### *Preliminary Matters*

It is necessary to understand a series of definitions so as not to lose one's way vis-à-vis this term in psychoanalytical discourse, because the use psychoanalytical discourse makes of letters, or the letter, is not exactly the same as the use other discourses make of it. We shall see at the end of this essay how the letter works for artists, but first we must go through the doctrine.

### *Language Structure and Speech Signification*

Lacanian psychoanalysis takes the structure of language as the place from which the entire weaving of the doctrine is sustained and requires us to differentiate three elements: Language Structure, Words and Writing. The last two can occur without being subject to the first, though when they are, this will matter to us. Obviously, flaws in this articulation retroactively explain to us certain pathologies. Language structure isn't the structure of a specific language or languages in general: language structure must be established step by step as the doctrine arising from the practice of psychoanalysis as it moves forward.

Let's take a look at some elements of this doctrine. The smallest element is a signifier and, unlike the Saussurian-based theory of language, there is a signifier only if there are at least two signifiers. Therefore, in principle, there is no isolated signifier on its own or sole signifier<sup>1</sup>. Unlike the Theory of Signs in language, this is not about representation of a signified by a signifier - or vertical representation- but about horizontal articulation of one signifier to another signifier. This doctrine of the signifier leaves the syntax of linguistic signs proper outside the purview of psychoanalysis.

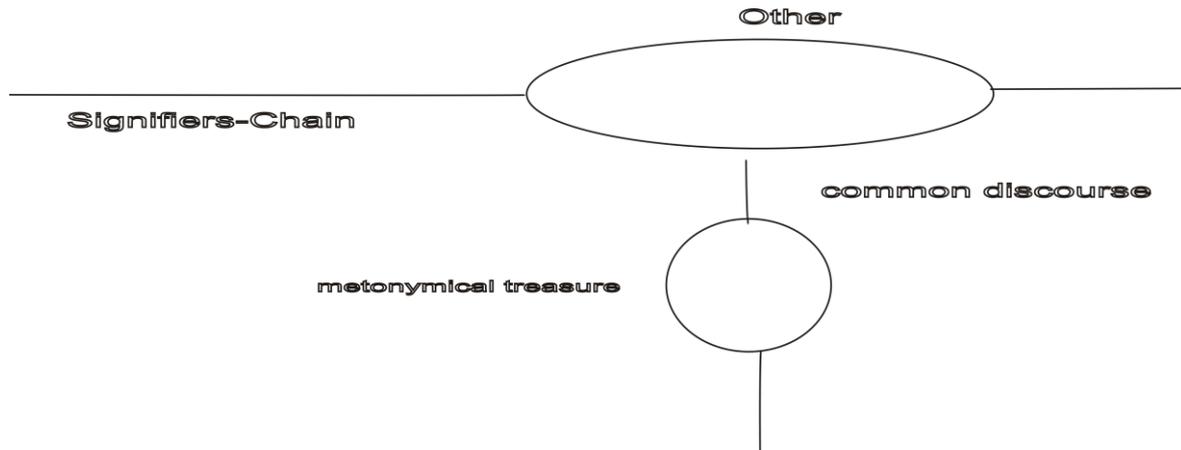
Syntax and semantics will be reused, added over the rhetoric of signification, in what Lacan calls *lalangue*, to obtain an effect of sense from the language structure. This effect always comes after the effect of the subject and is parallel to that of signification.

The minimal structure of language is formed by grouping signifiers together in a battery of signifiers, the synchronic aspect of the signifier. It is one of the features of the Lacanian Other. These signifiers are deployed diachronically in what Lacan theorizes as the signifying chain. The signifying chain has its own logic. Several fundamental possibilities are established vis-à-vis this synchronic and diachronic structure: one is the choice of signifier; two is the playing around with the signifier; and three is substitution of one signifier by another. To establish the relationship of language, the Other, and the signifying chain and articulate them in speech (*parole*), Lacan turns to

---

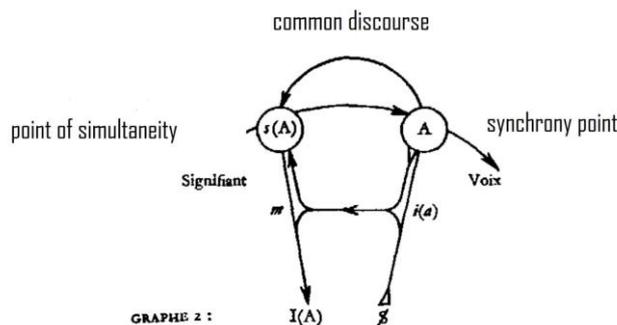
<sup>1</sup> At the end of his work, Lacan wonders if the One can exist on its own.

the intersection of the first signifying chain and a second chain that he calls the signifying chain of common discourse or intentionality. The diagram below illustrates this:



This second chain features the system of *LaLangue*, or metonymic storehouse, where synchrony occurs, and it features the empty speech of common discourse as a chain or pseudo-chain.

These two diachronic chains intersect<sup>2</sup> each other at two points: one is synchronic and is where the Other of the battery of signifiers and the metonymic storehouse (old crystallized metonymies) of *LaLangue*<sup>3</sup> meet; the second is acts simultaneously and is where the product of choices and substitutions ends in signification<sup>4</sup> or metaphor that is not only substitution<sup>5</sup>. Lacan does not define one point for the metonymy that is not only combination. Look at the two formulas that he gives for then in the graph cited below. See the diagram in which the arrow for common discourse doubles back and intersects the signifying chain, once again:



<sup>2</sup> The naming of the father (formerly called the paternal metaphor) must have occurred to ensure the point of signification (otherwise psychosis ensues) and the introduction into structure of language to ensure the Other intersects with the storehouse of metonymies, or else autism ensues.

<sup>3</sup> *LaLangue* in French

<sup>4</sup> Translation Note: The term meaning or sense is used to translate the French term *sens* and the term signification is used to translate the French term *signification*. They are translations of the German terms used by the German mathematician Frege - *sinn* and *bedeutung*.

<sup>5</sup> Let us recall the formula for a metaphor and that it requires three signifiers. As such, there must be tying together (knotting) for it to be sustained.

These two operations, moreover, generate sense if we add the syntax and semantics of *la langue* to the rhetoric of the metaphor and metonymy. The first one, goes beyond the barrier of the signifier and the second one does not. However, in his late work Lacan locates metonymy as what goes beyond this barrier in the opposite sense: as an accounting of *jouissance*.

For making the choices, substitutions and playing around that support metaphorical and metonymic operations, the unconscious rests on the signifier as its material support: the letter. This support is the first definition of a letter and it is a phonetic definition; these letters are allophones and the making of allophones using distinctive traits: palatal, fricative, dental, etc. They are letters that can be written based on the discourse of phonetics<sup>6</sup> using the International Phonetic Alphabet. If we continued to break down these letters, we would end up at sound frequencies, written as letters based on the discourse of sound physics. *Without this material support, there would be no possibility of playing around with the signifier.* The letter is an intermediary, not a principle or an end.

What we have, therefore, is that the letter, without ever being the primary element of language, is the tool or instrument on which the unconscious rests in performing its operations. Without the letter, it would be impossible for a *lapsus* to occur or for there to be any formation of the unconscious with a similar structure. Even the symptom.

Between the point of synchrony and the point of simultaneity, as if it were a bellows that alternately fills with air and then empties, we have tense logic (*temps logique*). It is the instant of the gaze that coincides with the point of synchrony, the time to comprehend in the retroaction between the two intersections, and the moment to conclude at the point of simultaneity. As the process must be repeated, Lacan introduces *scansion* as a “temporal signifier”. With it, the conclusion at the point of simultaneity returns to the point of synchrony where it is stored, and at that instant, the graph closes off. We thus have an opening and closing moment that goes from right to left and back again to the right of the graph. In this subjective process, this opening and closing must be repeated several times, so the graph opens up again and the time for comprehending and the time of concluding return to begin yet another scansion. The process can be repeated many times, finishing when the moment to conclude is reduced to the instant of the gaze. Thus, for each signification process, there is matching meaning and secondary identification, if we take into account the narcissistic topic that is sustained due to another order: the imaginary and its complexity.

The structure of the Other and the signifying chain are perfectly elaborated in the *Écrits* texts entitled “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter’” and “The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious..” It may also be read in the first part of *Seminar V* on “The Formations of the Unconscious” with regard to the effect of sense (meaning), or in *Seminar*

---

<sup>6</sup> We justify below the necessity of having a discourse in which to write.

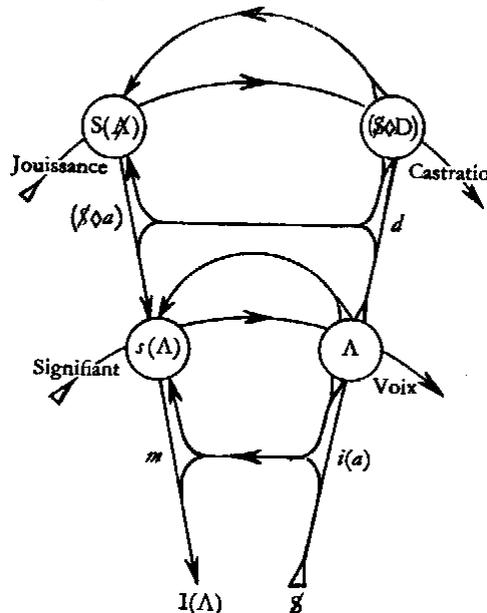
VI “Desire and its Interpretation”. The time dimension is elaborated in the *Écrits* in “Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty...”

Lacan names the letter being replicated as agency (*instance*) because in order to define these replicas as letters one must think that, in a text with a double sense of texture, the same letter appears as part of many signifiers but it is the same letter. C. S. Peirce as a logician said that every occurrence, or replica of a letter in a text is a replica.

*Language Structure and the Discourses*

Psychoanalytical discourse is not only based on signifying process and the effect of sense; To these must be added *jouissance*, which Freud started theorizing with the concept of drive. To articulate the drive to the unconscious and speech, Lacan adds a second signifying chain: the act of utterance<sup>7</sup> (*énonciation*), defining the first as statement (*énoncé*). But the synchronic point of this second chain where it intersects with the first pseudo-chain is treated very carefully so it does not turn into a second Other, which would mean that there exists an Other of the Other. But there is not one, and Lacan writes a synchronous formula of the drive in the *Écrits* “Subversion of the Subject...”:  $\$ \diamond D$ . He makes the second segment of common discourse’s pseudo-chain into the chain of Demand and, through operations we will not go into here, the drive signifiers appear which, though synchronic, can be deployed diachronically in this second chain of the utterance.

GRAPHE COMPLET :



<sup>7</sup> Translation Footnote: sometime translated as enunciation, though in linguistics, translated as utterance., the distinction being the act of utterance (*énonciation*) and what is uttered (*énoncé*).

If we now name the signifiers of the statement chain  $S_2$  and those of the of the utterance chain  $S_1$ , we get the unconscious and the Id, a reservoir of the drives, both linked by two chains that produce the subject in its temporality and in its logical anteriority to any coming-to-be, or advent, of the signified. This copula does not occur as a matter of course and when it does not occur, serious problems arise, and it is here that the direction of cure is located and comes into play.

This is also where the definition of the subject as that which represents a signifier,  $S_1$ , for another signifier,  $S_2$  takes shape though it never represents it. That's why if this copula process is lost and only the first floor (of the graph) remains, the subject is dead and we are in psychosis. Psychosis is not produced by a rupture in the retroaction at the level of the floor of the statement; it is produced by the dis-articulation of statement and utterance<sup>8</sup>.

We can set out this temporal constitution of the subject on the basis of the matheme of the discourse of the master:

$$\frac{S_1}{\S} \rightarrow \frac{S_2}{a}$$

We can apply the same tense logic to the second floor in its symmetry to the first, but what matters now is that a new concept appears: *pulsation*. It is the opening between the statement and the utterance, that is, the vertical opening extending upwards from below. This is how the opening and closing of the unconscious must now be understood: the doubly articulated opening of the three chains at the same time that extend leftwards, two for the signifier and one for signified, and the upward-directed opening of the two signifying chains. It is in this sense that Lacan's answer about having to respond from the lower floor to the question about desire ("What does the Other want from me") must be understood, or heard, but with signifiers from the floor above. That is, in terms<sup>9</sup> of drive. That's why he locates *jouissance* and castration on the graph at the level of the utterance.

### *The Issue of the Object and Lack in the Other*

We have explained the articulation between different signifiers but not why the object a appears, that is, the object that caps the unconscious when it closes. The axiom is that the signifier cannot signify itself. This explains why the Other is barred and cannot account for itself. Is

---

<sup>8</sup> Such is the case in paranoia, in which simultaneity, significance, is manifested in delusions. In contrast, in schizophrenia, this simultaneity point is lost. This is the essential difference between one psychosis and the other.

<sup>9</sup> The concept of terms in Russell's logic, which is the one that Lacan was using at that time, is equivalent to the term /class/. Further on here we shall better understand, in the Seminar "From one Other to the other", how Lacan returns to the theory of classes, which is not set theory, to theorize better the difference between the two types of signifiers and, above all, their relationship to the object a.

this a synchronic or diachronic fact of the structure? We say that it is a synchronic fact that may be located diachronically in the simultaneity operation. The utterances's signifying chain cannot be a meta-language of demand's pseudo-chains<sup>10</sup>; it's the same thing Freud pointed out when he said identity of perception does not exist. If there is no possible homology between the two chains of the signifier and the signified, meta-language does not exist<sup>11</sup>. Now, this break in meta-language,  $\mathbb{A}$  has two consequences:

- a) The signifying process on the statement floor must produce a positive signifier, an actual signifier, that indicates this to us from the place of the signifier and on the basis of a signifying operation, that the Other is barred: it is the signifier of a lack in the Other,  $S(\mathbb{A})$ . It is very important to understand that it is signification that does not produce an effect of sense, but rather, it produces a signifier. And it produces this signifier because on the statement floor, the signifier of the chain is mapped to the signified formed by the Demand's signifiers, and not above the signifiers of common discourse. This is extremely important because it implies already being in the domain of what is written and not just of speech (*parole*).
- b) That which escapes in the attempt to synchronize the chain of the statement to the chain of demand, which cannot be made into a signifier, and thus can never be a signifier, is denoted by Lacan as an object, the object  $\underline{a}$ . We thus understand that the signifier of a lack in the Other and the object  $\underline{a}$  are a folding of each other. Modern logic studies this using combinatorial classes and deduces from them that attributes as a whole cannot equal what is distributed as a whole. But modern logic studies do not construct the consequence here as object  $\underline{a}$ ; it comes from the field of psychoanalysis and from Lacan's teaching following Freud's lead and various other authors.

### *The Question of Discourses and the Unconscious. The Writing Apparatus*

The next step Lacan takes is to open out the structure of the copula of the chains into additional combinations, the quadripoles, in the relationship of field of the subject and the field of the Other. In this way, there can be four different structures between the field of the subject and the field of the Other in the four constitutive elements of the subject that never ceases to construct itself. These are the four discourses. We will not go into them here but we will indicate their import to us. We believe that the unconscious, insofar as it has a temporal dimension that we have already made explicit (pulsation) and which must be further studied, is beyond a specific discourse, although

---

<sup>10</sup> *Mutatis mutandis*, the utterance chain cannot be such for the pseudo-chain of common discourse.

<sup>11</sup> It is often mistakenly pointed out that there is no meta-language between the utterance chain and the chain of what is uttered, taking the first as the chain of the signifier and the second as the chain of the signified in the topic of the unconscious. We insist once again: the signified's chain is the one of common discourse and demand; and the chain of the signifier (signifying chain) is divided into two chains.

where it is best reflected is in the discourse of the master as that which constitutes. Also, Lacan points out that something of or from the Unconscious is only captured in the discourse of the hysteric. Obviously, we would have to build three graphs similar to the one in the "Subversion of the Subject..." to account for the articulation of the other three discourses and their temporality. This is so that the time dit-mention (the said dimension) of each discourse does not get away from us, from which we only have one spatial matheme available to us.

Now, the discourses are acting between the signifier and the signified on the bar as a structure of articulation for the signifying chains between them. Here, we may ask the following question: how and on what basis does the passion of the signifier, whether articulated as discourse or not<sup>12</sup>, act on the signified? Lacan's answer in his writing called "Lituraterre" is clear: with a writing apparatus. Lacan picks up the question that Einstein asks himself about science. This is how we approach what he points out to us in "The Mis-taking of the Subject Supposed to Know" ("La méprise du sujet supposé savoir"). In scientific discourse, writing is produced or expressed more clearly; scientific discourse yields letters in the form of formulas and in so doing a real is artificially supported. Albeit respecting its laws, the real is put to work in a suitable way: this is *Wirklichkeit*. So we have a discourse that produces a theory about the real. This theory produces letters, and with them we have reached the Moon.

It should be remembered that a theory can be delirious and the experimental method is the condition for this theory to be tied to the real and not become loosened. This is *the method* that science holds dear. However, the fact that the method assures us that the formula is correct and does apply to the real never ceases to be surprising. Newton, when asked, "How can it be this way?", answered, "Hypothesis *non fingo*". But Einstein is a bit more concerned about this and goes beyond experimental proof by wondering: How is it that formulas written with letters match the real?

Einstein realizes that letters trickle down from discourse (*ruisseler*) and that it is through them that we act on the signified. Exactly as letters in Lacanian algebra trickle down from analytic discourse. Regardless of the extent to which experimentation proved it, he wanted to know why. And that's the reason he builds a God for science, a God mathematician and one that is not dis-honest. A God that would not change laws overnight so that today's experiment could be compared to tomorrow's experiment. This is the God that Lacan relates to Pascal's God, the one from whom science would trickle down without a conscious, and we recall here that Lacan does not set out either from the good faith of the Other or from the bad faith of the Other but rather from the non-faith of the Other. This algebraist and scientific God is the God behind our current subjectivity and, as it is a God whose lack must be sutured, the consequence of which we are experiencing as a pandemic of depression and euphoria, an era of "affect". It's not by chance that

---

<sup>12</sup> Some pathologies assume poor construction of the discourse: holophrase.

Nazism was built as a perverse-psychopathic machine with this God. To do so, Leninism had to carry out, or perform an act (*passage à l'acte*) from a view of history that claimed to be scientific. What was missing here? An imputation of bad faith that was not in science but yes was in class hate.

It is from here that we obtain a fundamental point for establishing transference as the introduction of this God into psychoanalysis: the subject supposed to know; a God that would know that what the subject has still not come to know. A depositary-of-knowledge God.

Let us now return to the letter: these letters that trickle down from discourse, that are written from the place of discourse, though they may be materially the same as the phonetics of the signifier's materiality, no longer function in the same manner because they have gone on to be constituted by the written trait. And what we must not do, we reiterate, is to locate the written as a meta-language of the spoken. To avoid doing this, in *Seminar IX*, Lacan locates something that we must not forget: the letter that has trickled down from the rupturing of the signifier, in its dimension as semblant, needs an alphabet to be written, that is, to not be part of a system or battery like the signifier is. An alphabet is no longer a system or set (battery) or an Other, it's simply a support for writing. And where does it come from? It comes from another discourse, commonly from a market economy's discourse, as we said at the beginning of this text. An analysand has to learn to read his or her unconscious and obtain or build for him- or herself, as is the case, his or her own alphabet to be cured. Obviously, in one manner for the neurotic and in another for the psychotic, but it is the psychotics who mark the path. *Psychoanalytic doctrine is nothing more than the depository of signifiers made into letters, letrified signifiers, as mathemes of the letters that authors build for themselves to cure themselves or that they heard from the analytical cures of other people.*

The advance that Lacan manages to make beyond Einstein is that he thinks that this is how we make furrows in the real (*ravinement*) and he leaves us with a disquieting question: do we try to manage or deal with the signified with letters that we produce with our discourses based on language structure, and as such, will we know nothing of the real? Well, yes, this is the thesis, and hence why we can only anchor ourselves to it through triskellization of the orders in another type of operation that Lacan begins contemplating after *Seminar XXI* "The Names of the Father". Apply this thesis to science, and you will see how the isomorphism of the symbolic and the real of the methodologists goes up in smoke, and maybe one can understand why, the more science there is, the more the planet dies. The better life that is the promise of scientific discovery drifts off to a slow death and the poisoning of our environment and of ourselves remains. And why? Well, because there is an inverse path from the signified to the signifier, a path that also goes through, or occurs through the letter that Lacan calls ravishing or ravishment (*ravissement*). For ravishing to occur, something from the

real<sup>13</sup> is written onto the symbolic, onto the signified at a specific moment in time; it then goes onto the signifier, in the same way that this happened to Madame Curie when she found the radiograph of a key where there should have been nothing; the signified. What the key wrote, wrote cancer on her body, but along the way it went from being a signified to a signifier and is called radioactivity<sup>14</sup>.

This allows us to grasp that the concept of writing in Lacan does not just refer to the usual understanding of writing as what is written out. Writing has two meanings: one is mediation or what comes between signifier and the signified, what the Unconscious writes or is written in it; the second is the furrowing in the real. This furrowing is chiseled onto the real from the symbolic where the letter acts as the support -and the instrument will be the "chisel and the hammer" that each of us uses- and that requires operations in the three orders and not just from the Unconscious<sup>15</sup>. There is no real of the Unconscious; the real acts on or receives from it. In these operations there is also the inverse direction, or path, as well. Letters are engraved on our body when something is written from the real. These letters go on to become a part of the signifier and then the Unconscious can produce metonymy that accounts for *jouissance*. Or, in the same manner: when the letter passes -as chiseled out by the real- to the Unconscious, becoming a part of metonymy, it transforms whatever is in the real into *jouissance* and this *jouissance* can be worked out or through the Unconscious via signifying operations. Lacan's example here is like a spider spinning a web: first, it marks a spot, then it leaves a track, then it makes a letter - a hexagon - and finally it produces a signifier if it is articulated to another one. But it is not the spider who will do that.

### *The written and saying. Beyond the Signified.*

The question that arises now, we ask this way: is our real like the real of science or like what science assumes is the real? We have to answer that it is not, since science is what is necessary. Evidently, from the symbolic we can include the impossible as its negation; *Verneinug* acts on this negation if it is done with a discourse. In psychoanalysis, things are a bit more complicated. Freud located the drive as a concept that mythologized this writing of the real in the symbolic; So that is what is necessary. But Lacan would emphasize less what is written than what is not written. Freud did not envisage this. What is important for Lacan is this impossible and not so much the drive or the  $S_1$  signifiers which is what is written as necessary (never ceases to be written) in the place of what cannot be written because it is impossible (never ceases to not be written). That is a 180 degree turn. Science emphasizes

---

<sup>13</sup> It can be seen that the signified is not the real.

<sup>14</sup> Once it became a signifier via metonymy, the theory of radioactivity could then be built via metaphor.

<sup>15</sup> That is why Lacan goes on to study the structure of the orders and not only the structure of the unconscious.

what is necessary and the impossible is its negation. Psychoanalysis, on the contrary, emphasizes the impossible: the sexual relationship of the two sexes of the species cannot be written, there is no letter that can be metonymized by a signifier that will create this joint. And so the necessary then appears as a negation of that impossible. Furthermore, this occurs in time (is given temporal form) as repetition with the “does not cease” to be written or to be not written. Then, when the drive is written, something does not through into the formula of the drive and, in the end, cannot be made diachronic in the utterance (*énonciation*) chain. So, how does one get from the language apparatus this idea about what is not being written and that it is articulated to speech?

This is where Lacan moves on to *saying (dire)* and the *said (le dit)*. It's in saying as ex-isting vis-à-vis the said that the impossible becomes located from the act of speaking. The said thus already assumes the dimension of what is written in the act of speaking. The unconscious is, thus, located between the language structure and act of saying (speech act). It's important to realize that Lacan has just located all of the Freudian drives in language. Everything that is written as necessary he made so by going from saying to what is said, and it is as “a said” that the Freudian drive is located. Thus, the drive in relationship to the Other is much better articulated, and does not need to be unfolded much more formally in a meta-language than in the drive formula from the *Écrit* “Subversion of the Subject...”. The impossible is that which does not go through saying into the utterance chain. It is an extremely intelligent formalization of what Freud called the language of the drives.

So, the drives are already unattached from biological necessity and it will be at a second moment in time that what was written will catch up with the body and its needs<sup>16</sup>. It is fundamental to realize that once a certain real has passed to the signifier, the unconscious will be able to act by introducing castration as what will account for this impossibility via what is contingent. The manner in which the topic of the unconscious will be built is by writing the phallus as signifier, if such is the case: the folding of the statement-utterance supported by the phallic function. And it will do so as if it were a meta-language, but as meta-language does not exist at one point, language and meta-language will be conjoined. And they will be conjoined at the point that we elaborated above as the signifier of a lack in the Other.

The phallus' *Verdrängung* constitutes the unconscious structured as a language, as a second element if the phallus was written in saying. We thus have two signifiers whose forclusion (understood as an expulsion since it was written) of which produces paranoid psychosis in the first case and manic-depressive psychosis in the second. Logically, if the phallus is forclosed, it is impossible to locate the signifier of a lack in the Other since the floor of the utterance is not constituted as

---

<sup>16</sup> The graph of desire in the “Subversion of the Subject...” has already been gone beyond. It is only useful for the discourse of the master.

undifferentiated from the floor of the statement. With this clarification in mind, we can think there are “affective” psychoses, narcissistic psychoses, with just the forclusion of the signifier of a lack in the Other, and not phallic forclusion.

### *Object a and the Third Type of Letter*

Writing introduces not only the writing of a signifier, intermediated by the letter, in the form of a mark on the real. In fundamental metaphors the signifying chains are made into triskeles and an element that is *not* a signifier or the real appears. In the center of the triskele made up of the two signifying chains of discourse and the chain of the signified, a third element appears, defined as the object a. Lacan first theorized it using the hole at the center of the torus<sup>17</sup> going beyond the signifying chains, which has already been discussed above. This formalization went very well for the outward facing face of desire of the object a. But when he deals with the path returning from the real to the symbolic, the path of metonymy, he has to position the [cara of the] object a's surplus-*jouissance*. It's in “*L'Étourdit*” that he deals with this. It is not an empty space that the top side of the object litte a's fills, this is about getting an object of the possible ways of covering the Other of *jouissance*. The object of the drive in Freud. Here is where he proposes an operation he calls Signifying Involution and gives us the object a in the form of a Möbius strip that comes from making an interior eight cut on it. This Möbius strip matches or coincides with the central cut of a single twist on the strip. That means that the pathway whereby a Möbius strip is obtained by cutting a torus into an interior eight and re-attaching one of the sides of the resulting double strip identified with itself, is equivalent to cutting out an interior eight on the strip and re-alinging both pieces and rebuilding the torus.

Please see our text at International Virtual Seminar in this regard:

### *“La involución significativa hasta L'étourdit”*

(The Doctrine of the Cut Not Located in the Cross-cap but rather on the Möbius Band: *L'Étourdit*)<sup>18</sup>

To put it more simply, cutting a Möbius band down the middle in a single twist is equivalent to cutting a Möbius band inside a Möbius band. The cut is equivalent to the Möbius band itself! Which is why Lacan says that the cut is the structure itself of the band<sup>19</sup>. We can see now that the phantasm, as is the case of the Möbius band, can appear and disappear, shrink to this circle or expand into a Möbius band. It's a

---

<sup>17</sup> A topological surface with which Lacan formally elaborated the extension of the signified in *Seminar IX*.

<sup>18</sup> Translator's Note: *L'Étourdit* in French means the dizzying. *Se sentir étourdit* is to feel dizzy. The pun here is the following: *l'étourdit* is homophonic to *les tours dits*, which may be translated as: the twists or turns or spins that are said or spoken.

<sup>19</sup> This sentence is absolutely incomprehensible if what has just been located is not understood.

magnificent discovery for us to grasp the way in which, when writing a signifier from the real and accessing the symbolic, there appears, or there may appear, this object that is metonymic to the cut itself that is equivalent to the cut itself and at the same time is a piece of the surface. The fact that, when a signifier is written, One is simultaneously an object within it and one can disappear without being the real, locates extremely rigorously for us Freud called the object of the drive. A beyond-the-signifier but built with the signifier and without being the real but with one foot in the real. If this is not a signifier and it is not the real, what is it? It is third type of letter(s).

Here we are not dealing either with a letter as a material support for the signifier or the letter that trickles down from discourse as writing along the pathway of signifier to signified or back again, that is, inversely. Here the letter is written in going from the real to the symbolic, at the place where the sexual relationship cannot be written, as additional *jouissance* (*le plus de jouir*) introduced by the enjoying substance of the signifier where it cannot be written, and as such, where the *jouissance* of the sexual relationship is lost<sup>20</sup>. This *jouissance* is sexually colorless as it does not go through the phallic order, the *jouissance* Lacan called a-sexed.

This is why Lacan is so interested in reminding us of the difference in the ways letters are used in algebra and in set theory. The first way of using letters in writing arises in mathematical discourse. Since this writing comes from the signifier, it creates letters that retroactively make letters of the signified, or letrifies them, to tame them for science: this algebra that makes a letter of, or letrifies all the possible, is the ideal of science. On the other hand, in set theory, letters that designate sets and that are the sets themselves, if we follow Lacan's thesis here, allow us to elaborate the space of *jouissance* in parts and not as signifiers. Each letter is a possible subset of it. As much as we try from the contingency of the phallic function as upholding the Unconscious, from the topic of the unconscious, to account for all the *jouissance* that the signifier introduces, we will have an un-graspable remainder, or leftover (if we go from the signifier to the signified) or a surplus (if we go from the signified to the signifier) that will be a letter that was written first from the real. This letter must be a part of the naming of the subject embedded in the signifier that signifies it, embedded, we say, amongst the other letters with which this signifier has been constructed. But in order to understand this mechanism, one must radically differentiate *jouissance* from the real. The real writes the signifier as well as the

---

<sup>20</sup> The only way to locate *jouissance* using the psychic apparatus is through its prohibition. Lacan locates it as stuck to psychic apparatus. That's why there is no better way of not accepting the castration than to continue believing that the sexual relationship can be written, and no better way to recognize its existence than staying in prohibitions. This is very clear in hysteric anesthesia, or in obsessive fears. It's the superego's paradox: it presents prohibition of *jouissance* as an impossible *jouissance*, making the subject believe that *jouissance* may be had. Freud fell into this trap but Lacan did not.

object a's letter. Because *jouissance* is not the real, one must construct the sexual formulas that differentiate between various *jouissances*. This implies moving on to the Borromean knot and abandoning the projective plane to do the logic of *jouissance* and its negations.

### *The Letter in Art*

Where better can the difference between the different uses of the letter be grasped than in art? When a painter paints, he "writes" his own alphabet with his paintbrush, if he has been able to construct one for himself, or else he uses the letter of a fellow painter<sup>21</sup>. But there is usually always a point at which painters write, especially if they are stabilized psychotics, a dominant letter. A letter that will appear here and there.

Let us think about the example of Dalí: his fundamental letters are geometry and perspective taken from mathematical discourse. Another letter for him is colour, which springs from his own palette as an alphabet. They are the material supports for his signifiers. The second type of letter that he writes based on his discourse, to which he even gave the name of paranoid-critic<sup>22</sup> were the letters that enabled him to work the signified, and among them are his deformed clocks, where some people believe they are seeing the phallus. We do not see it that way. These letters are part of his signifiers. And the letter of the object a? We believe that it is the one covered by the gaze, those eyes that show up everywhere. In his own self-portrait posse, Dalí forced the body, i(a), to present this gaze to us, from its "little a" abject<sup>23</sup> side. A gaze that obviously contained *jouissance*, the side of a as the surplus-*jouissance*, the place where, as any subject, he had to confront the sexual relationship that cannot be written and that left him stupefied in view of the hole of Gala's vagina. We do realized that these eyes are always linked to an  $S_1$ : the cut made by a blade.

Another example is Jackson Pollock. Until he sets aside his paintbrush and starts to write directly with a can of paint, he is not yet reached his most fruitful period. He changes alphabets; the dripping technique does not just imply a change of instrument but also the traces made by his strokes on the canvas support or uphold, as letters that are illegible to other people, a signifying world with its dimensions of semblances. This painter helps us understand the mechanism through which the letter operates.

### *Images, signifiers, traces (print) and marks*

---

<sup>21</sup> This is the difference between a professional and a master in any discipline or art.

<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately Freud did not confer the proper value to this. Lacan did not let it get away.

<sup>23</sup> A neologism with which Lacan denotes, at the end of his work, all of sides of object a's at the same time.

Psychoanalytic discourse implements three orders and not two, as science does. An imaginary constructed out of images, even ideas in the Platonic sense. A symbolic constructed out of signifiers and real as an impossible. Then in the real we can only, at most, read and write marks. Marks, like a lunar crater, do not signify anything and in fact do not exist in principle. The imaginary register is necessary to give them a form at a particular moment in time, that is, to turn them into an image. We then get the concept of trace: mark + image. Thanks to the imaginary - which is why we have given examples of painters - the furrow that is there in the real is "detected". We insist on the necessity of the imaginary order for this and the oft-reviled topic of the mirror or narcissism in the Lacanian field. So the trace is the imaginization of the mark, written by Lacan like this: iR. Now comes the second step, the reading of the trace. This can only be done in a specific discourse, because on its own, it means nothing. This is why Lacan insists on, in chapter three of *Seminar XX "Encore"*, the fact that the letter is not made to be read. To think there are letters in the real that must be read is to go back to the Kabbala. One must read traces and to do this the apparatus of the signifying chain is needed. That's when the trace can "represent the subject for another signifier". And that's when also the trace has moved on to be a signifier, a One. But, of course, it contains the material support that the structure of language brings to it, that must be incorporated by the subject. It does not contain any materiality from the real. How is this reading and the process of becoming significant of the trace effectuated? Through the process of making trace(s) phonemic. It's by an act of reading in *Saying* that this step can be made, in which, as we showed above, "what is drive-related" continues to be located in a language mechanism just as Freud always thought: "the language of the drives" he called it. This phonemization uses letters that are material supports of the signifier. We thus have a signifier, imprinted on the body of *jouissance*, that can move from the floor of the signified to the floor of the signifier producing the ravishing (*ravissement*) that is usual in these situations.

In Pollock's case, this appears when he has crises and remains absorbed facing his work, almost the death of the subject, and cannot read anything. Until something from inside him can be read, he is in an almost catatonic atonia, he cannot move on to the ravishing (*ravissement*) typical of painters. And then, suddenly, the signifying chain starts up again, begins to operate, and the subject represented by that signifier that emerged from the process of becoming a phoneme again represents him, the subject revives and the signifying apparatus is again in play. The structure of the discourses is now working. Once this is explained, we go on to the inverse path.

Letters trickle down from this discourse constructed with signifiers. This assumes that the signifier as semblance breaks up and drips down over the signified. Precisely that happens when Pollock abandons the semblance of "paintbrush" and "palette" and ruptures the semblance of "traces" (by flinging paint) and through a fantastic metonymy the signifier "dripping" appears. This dripping down moves from the literal

to that which is along the coast (*litoral*)<sup>24</sup>, makes it so the paint, as something which is carried out, slowly starts to turn into a new alphabet on the canvas. He gives to this writing the dimension of painting<sup>25</sup>, which means that he gives a form - makes "his abject" - out of the letters that emerge; yet, they are traces. So what they are is imaginized, but from the point of view of being on the canvas they never cease being "marks" on it. This imaginized aspect, the trace, is what gives his writing the status of art, as is the case in all art. And another subject that admires it may take these traces as pure marks and do their own reading of it so that the process begins all over again. This is why art is never mono-semantic, and one of the reasons for its greatness: a demonstration that never ceases to prove that the Other of the Other does not exist. "Literature that never shuts up", Michel Foucault called this in his book *The Order of Things*. With regard to Pollack, the question remains about whether he was able to write something more in the real, beyond dripping onto the signified: we believe not. The subject did not manage to write itself on the real as a fundamental mark, which is why "he let go of himself" in the accident by which he lost his life.

Carlos Bermejo. Barcelona, March 2008.

---

<sup>24</sup> Translation note: the bed of the torus.

<sup>25</sup> Or else he would not have been an artist.