

Writing and Writers

Sarah Jones*
Ben Scot McGill*
Tine Norregaard-Arroyo*
Christiane Weller*

This year the editorial committee has undertaken the project of producing a joint writing from the work of a cartel. To leave the space open for a play between different voices, the cartel has decided to present its work in the form of an editorial article. In the following we investigate aspects of the interface of psychoanalysis and literature. The work of artists and writers holds a prominent position for Freud and Lacan in their articulation of the psychoanalytic discourse; to the extent that Lacan claims: for Freud ‘the artist always precedes him, [...] he does not have to play the psychologist where the artist paves the way for him’.¹ In our engagement with this field we consider Lacan’s criticisms of the production of psychobiographies of authors in favour of a writing, which leans on the ‘practice of the letter’.²

In his paper *The Moses of Michelangelo* Freud suggests a relationship between psychoanalysis and the work of art that proceeds on the basis of interpretation. He underlines that the interpretation should be directed towards ‘discovering the meaning and content of what is represented in his [the artist’s] work’.³ So, first and foremost what is brought out through the screen of an interpretation is taken in regard to the artist’s production rather than the artist himself.

Freud’s exploration of the concept *unheimlich* in his paper entitled in translation, *The Uncanny*⁴ includes a detailed analysis of E.T.A. Hoffmann’s short story *The Sand-Man*.⁵ He considers the uncanny

* Member, The Freudian School of Melbourne

• Psychoanalyst. Analyst Member, The Freudian School of Melbourne

primarily to be an aesthetic category, and begins with an examination of the linguistic heritage of the concept.⁶ *Unheimlich*, he argues, refers to ‘a class of the frightening, which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar’.⁷ From his etymological analysis Freud concludes that only the German word provides us with this sense of ambiguity, because it is at the same time the antonym and synonym of the term *heimlich*, or homely, the prefix *un-* being the marker of repression. Freud explores the situational contexts within which uncanny effects might be provoked and experienced, and these include the experience of reading.

Hoffmann’s *The Sand-Man* is taken up as an ‘individual case’ that functions to inform Freud’s analysis of the concept. The protagonist Nathaniel’s delusional relationship to the Sand-Man who tears out the eyes of children, along with the unreliability of the narrator propounds the uncanny effects for the reader. Freud also discusses the proliferation of fathers, and points of fixity in Nathaniel’s castration complex. Contained in a long footnote is a conclusive formulation regarding Nathaniel’s Oedipal structure. This is supplemented by only one brief reference to Hoffmann’s biography: the absence of his father during his childhood.⁸ We might question Freud’s inclusion in his footnote of this reference to Hoffmann’s biography in an analysis that otherwise takes up a literary work specifically in terms of the text itself; and a paper that pursues a concept in an exemplary way, through attention to the usages of language.

In *The Paths to Symptom Formation* Freud questions the creative endeavor of artists in terms of the psychological processes at play. He claims that the artist is someone ‘who achieves *through* his phantasy what originally the subject had achieved *in* his phantasy [...]’.⁹ What is more likely to be achieved for the neurotic, when his aspirations seek fulfillment *in* his phantasy, is a symptom: the symptom for which phantasies provide motivating forces and signifying constellations. Symptoms are referred to here as:

[...] acts detrimental, or at least useless, to the subject's life as a whole, often complained of by him as unwelcome and bringing unpleasure or suffering to him.¹⁰

Freud seems to suggest that artists are able to make a different use of the unconscious; as such, we can contrast the uselessness of symptoms with the use artists make of their phantasies in the production of socially valued objects. Considering that there remains something of what is 'useless' in relation to the phantasy, in the work of art there is also that which is able to pass, to enter into circulation. Freud writes:

A man who is a true artist has more at his disposal. In the first place, he understands how to work over his day-dreams in such a way as to make them lose what is too personal about them and repels strangers, and to make it possible for others to share in the enjoyment of them. He understands, too, how to tone them down so that they do not easily betray their origin from proscribed sources.¹¹

Thus, in regard to Freud we can claim that the artist is someone who is able to at once make use of and raise a screen to the personal. He forges a different relation to what originates from 'proscribed sources', and thereby also to his unconscious at work.

Lacan affirms Freud's appreciation of the artist as preceding him, while also articulating a response to a predominant mode of writing about literature and authors by psychoanalysts. In 1965 Lacan claims:

[...] attributing an author's avowed technique to some neurosis: boorishness. Or again, by showing it to be an explicit adoption of certain mechanisms which would thereby make an unconscious edifice of it: stupidity.¹²

This statement is made in the context of his homage to the writer Marguerite Duras, of whom he says, she 'knows, without me, what I

teach'.¹³ In his comments on her novel, *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* Lacan underlines her style as a 'practice of the letter', and he states that his own bearings remain entirely 'to the letter' drawn from the text, except where he pays homage to the writer.

Lacan refers to the workings of the unconscious and knowledge in regard to this novel, when he suggests that Marguerite Duras herself 'in her entire oeuvre, she doesn't know where Lol has come from'.¹⁴ This *not knowing* of Duras' pertains to the way Lol V. Stein does not emerge out of a certain obscurity: that is, Duras' 'practice of the letter' maintains the place of an erasure or failure in knowledge. Lacan's emphasis on not pursuing knowledge beyond the work of art has implications for the status of truth in his work: truth is sustainable only as fiction and as obscured.

The title of Lacan's later paper, *Lituraterre*, is a construction of a new word, combined from *litura* – erasure, and *terre* – earth, which affects a play of the letter. The 'practice of the letter' is articulated here in terms of an enactment of the 'erasure of no trace which is before'.¹⁵ For Freud the letter of the unconscious was associated with an impression, hidden in the mark of what carries a chronology of the primary, whereas for Lacan the letter is a consequence and an effect of language.

In *Lituraterre* Lacan responds to psychoanalysts' work with literature by attributing value to 'a less psychobiographic idea'.¹⁶ An idea he finds already in evidence in *avant-garde* literature, this literature that 'does not sustain itself by the semblance; [...] that does not prove anything but the caesura'.¹⁷ Working with an author's psychobiography would occlude, rather than elucidate the elision produced by way of the letter.¹⁸ The *less* of 'a less psychobiographic idea' resonates with a lack. The letter is evoked *en souffrance*, in failure, in suffering, leaving a trace of the fundamental discordance between knowledge and being in the subject. The import of Joyce's equivocation over the letter that becomes litter is drawn on in *Lituraterre* in relation to Lacan's affirmation of authors who are able

to avow through their writing the consequence of language for the speaking being – the litter or waste that his being becomes.

In his seminar from 1975, entitled *Joyce the Sinthome* Lacan suggests a reading of the relationship between Joyce and his writing, in which Joyce's style is called an *art-language*. This is a further working of Lacan's earlier acknowledgement of Joyce as a founder of the effect, whereby 'language is perfected when it knows how to play with writing'.¹⁹ The return to Joyce in this seminar marks a question for Lacan about the nature of creativity in his work. He proposes that Joyce's writing, as it promotes language in its breaks and turns, is an art-ifice: a device which is able to at once undo and weave something from 'what is at first presented as a symptom'.²⁰ In this context Lacan writes the symptom anew by using the old French spelling, *sinthome*. It is a spelling, which, as he himself states is effected by a certain Hellenisation, an injection of Greek into his French mother tongue. Lacan refers this Hellenisation of language to the effect in question in Joyce's writing: that is, the twisting and turning of the English language. This is a sustaining of a writing which names, a naming of what is impossible to speak, the Real. By also in this manner naming the writer *Joyce-the-Sinthome*, Lacan underlines the play of language and the letter in Joyce's work.

During June 2005 a Joyce-Lacan Symposium was held in Dublin in conjunction with Bloomsday. This was a celebration of the relationship of writing and psychoanalysis since the Fifth International James Joyce Symposium in 1975 in Paris, where Lacan gave the opening speech. Oscar Zentner's presenting paper at the Symposium, entitled *From the Correspondence Lacan-Joyce*, eloquently, and full of irony played on the association, the 'correspond-dance' made between these two figures, the author, Joyce, and the psychoanalyst, Lacan. The paper evoked the imaginary manner whereby these two *men of letters* might be made present. This provocation pointed to an illusion not foreign to the Symposium over all, considering the many papers that ventured along the path of

psycho-biographical inferences not only in relation to Joyce, but also his family.

Alternatively, with the content of a fictitious exchange of letters, Zentner played with the *Joyce effect* in Lacan himself. Taking up Lacan's supposition of Joyce's *making do* with the unconscious of his symptom in his writing, a question was left open. This marked a limit in regard to knowledge about Joyce. An invitation was extended to Joyce *over his dead body*. Zentner points out²¹ that this is a question already addressed by Joyce's own pen at the end of *A Portrait of the Artists as a Young Man*: 'with the only arms I allow myself to use – silence, exile and cunning'.²²

Linda Clifton's paper²³ presented at the Freudian School of Melbourne's 2005 *Homage to Lacan* pointed out that Lacan himself opened the door to the ambiguity of the *Joyce effect*, by moving beyond an analysis that referred only to Joyce's work, and by addressing the path of this creativity as a *savoir faire* of the symptom. However, by taking this leap Lacan sustains the tension of the psychoanalytic discourse with that of literature, through emphasizing the place of the unconscious in relation to the artist, as one that is supported by an enigma. Is it not at this place, by not closing the door to this *Joyce effect*, that a point is left unanswered about the unconscious, literature and writing after Lacan? Is not this the effect of the letter in the unconscious, as it draws a border, the littoral, around the hole in the knowledge supposed in the Other, be it Joyce or Lacan?

¹ Lacan, J. 'Homage to Marguerite Duras, on *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*', in: *Writing and Psychoanalysis: a Reader*, ed. Lechte, John. London, Sydney: Arnold, 1996, pp.136-142, p. 139.

² *Ibid*, p. 139.

³ Freud, S. 'The Moses of Michelangelo', 1914, London: Penguin Books, V. 14, Melbourne, 1990, pp. 249-282, p. 254.

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- ⁴ Freud, S. 'The 'Uncanny'', 1919, London: Penguin Books, V. 14, Melbourne, 1990, pp. 335-376.
- ⁵ Hoffmann, E.T.A. 'The Sand-Man', *Eight Tales of Hoffmann*, tr. J.M. Cohen, London: Pan Books, 1952.
- ⁶ Interestingly, Freud makes the following comments about his manner of discussing his investigations in this paper: 'my investigation was actually begun by collecting a number of individual cases, and was only later confirmed by an examination of linguistic usage. In this discussion, however, I shall follow the reverse course'. 'The 'Uncanny'', p. 340.
- ⁷ *Ibid*, p. 340.
- ⁸ *Ibid*, note 1, pp. 353-4.
- ⁹ Freud, 'The Paths to the Formation of Symptoms', London: Penguin Books V. 1, p. 424
- ¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 404
- ¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 423-4.
- ¹² Lacan, J. 'Homage to Marguerite Duras, on *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*', *op. cit.*, p. 138.
- ¹³ *Ibid*, p. 139.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 138.
- ¹⁵ Lacan, J. *Lituraterre*, unpublished translation, p. 11.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 5.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 15.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 4.
- ¹⁹ Lacan, J. *Book XX, Encore: on Feminine Sexuality: the Limits of Love and Knowledge*, ed. Miller, J.-A., tr. Bruce Fink, New York, London: Norton, 1998, p. 36. Lesson 1.9.73.
- ²⁰ Lacan, J. *The Seminar: Joyce and the Sinthome*, unpublished translation by Cormac Gallagher, p.10.
- ²¹ See Zentner, O. 'Borges and the Phantasm of Reality', in: *Papers of the Freudian School of Melbourne (PFSM)*, ed. Pereira, D., V. 21, 2000, pp. 67-83; and Zentner, O. 'The Exile of James Joyce – après le mot le deluge', in: *PFSM*, ed. Pereira, D., V. 22, 2004, pp. 301-356.
- ²² Zentner, O. quoting James Joyce, in: *From the Correspondence Lacan-Joyce*. Unpublished paper, read at the Symposium Joyce-Lacan, under the title *The Joyce Effect*, Dublin, Ireland 2005.
- ²³ Clifton, L. Unpublished paper, presented at the *Homage to Lacan* of the Freudian School of Melbourne, 2005.