

WRITING BEGINS WHERE PSYCHOANALYSIS ENDS

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WHERE THE AUTHOR PRETENDS TO ADDRESS THE READER

It would be legitimate if some of my readers, at least those who know or have heard about my psychoanalytic works, were to wonder why I feel the need to write and to publish a text that pertains to the domain of pure literature rather than the essay. What is more, this text seems so autobiographical, so confessional, so scandalously revealing!

Although we know that a story's narrator is only ever a mask—that hides its author, yes, but still does not adhere to his face as closely as a mould—it is more difficult to rid ourselves of the common illusion that truth is located behind the clothing of a veil.

Psychoanalytic experience shows that the truth itself has the "structure of a fiction," as Jacques Lacan said, and that the veil that clothes the truth, far from dissimulating it, instead manifests that it is by nature a semblance.

The mask of the narrator is thus a lure whose status as fiction is more important than the hidden reality in which it seems to make us believe. If you remove this mask, it is not certain that you will see the author stripped bare. The author—"stripped bare by his readers, even"—might not be found where one expects him. Once the veil is gone, the reader, caught in the trap, will look behind it in vain for a presence that is everywhere in the text except in the place where narrative convention designates it.

Nonetheless, the question—why this text?—remains pertinent, because it is a question that I also ask myself. I ask it to myself and I admit that I am not sure that there is a satisfactory answer, nor even that I would truly want to know this answer, were it to exist. Whence the interest, for me, of this postface, a moment of truth, or at least, an attempt to situate the truth at work in this strange story and the division of myself to which it bears witness: psychoanalyst and/or writer.

FLAC originates, first of all, in a passion for writing that has occupied me for a long time. As far as I can remember, I have always wanted to write and I have always written or, at least, tried to write. At the age of two-and-a-half years old, I covered school notebooks with little marks and signs, and I demanded that my mother read to me what I had written. This was the first stage of writing—perhaps the truest—in which it only exists through the voice of the Other who authenticates its code.

I was born into books (my parents owned a library consisting of many thousands of volumes); I grew up with them; they were my companions, my friends, my brothers, and sometimes my loves. The son of literature, I owe my first name to the fact that my father, who loved Dostoevsky above all other writers (to the point of studying Russian for many years in order to read him in the original), had decided, well before I was even conceived, that his son would have a Russian name. The Heavens favored me: I was spared being named “Fyodor.”

As a child, I gazed upon these walls of books with longing, and with a certain amount of fear. I wanted to read. I wanted above all to know what it means to be a “writer,” an enigmatic word that my parents often pronounced. I can still see them, I can still hear them exclaim, upon lifting their overwhelmed faces from the book in their hands, where they had been absorbed for a long time (that seemed even longer because I was not allowed to talk): “Now *that* is a writer!”

The spell that books cast upon my parents—under which I would soon fall myself—left me feeling perplexed and helpless. I wanted to penetrate this mystery. But I was still forbidden access to the library: only when I reached a certain age, they told me, could I discover these treasures. My parents had a word for it: the “age of reason”—another enigma that I never quite resolved. Consequently, I did all that I could to reach this age as quickly as possible...

Today I understand that the relation to the book that I observed in my parents is a metaphor for the sexual relation, that the image of their overwhelmed faces certainly comes from an other scene, and that the “writer” was the figure of the one who keeps this secret of this scene. However, this understanding has not dispelled the charm of the book. On the contrary. I now have a house full of books; but, just as when I was a child, I am always missing *The Book*, the only one that would be able to appease my desire, and that I know does not exist and cannot exist.

AS IF IT WERE NECESSARY TO BEGIN WITH A DEATH

FLAC was born of certain anecdotal circumstances. Like every book and every creation, it is the fruit of chance. Fortune rolled the dice without warning me in advance. The Muse staggers forth with an irresolute step and often leaves us no choice but to follow her. These circumstances made writing a matter of absolute urgency, so it seems that I should discuss them briefly, without false modesty and without disguised complacency.

In April 1992, during a banal and minor surgical procedure, the doctors discovered that I had cancer. An extremely rare and virulent cancer, without hope. The doctor, whom I pressed to tell me the truth without hedging or false promises, managed, after hesitating for three days, to conquer his own anxiety. “Mr. André,” he said, “you have three, at most six months to live.” With a certainty that still shocks me, a response instantaneously rose to my lips: “Then I know what I have to do.”

What I had to do was write a book, the book that I had borne within myself for twenty-five years and that I had never succeeded to write, although I had, during the whole time, blackened thousands of pages, drafted and sometimes finished texts that, one after the other, I invariably consigned to the wastebasket, overtaken by the state of dissatisfaction in which they left me.

I set immediately to work, lifted by an alacrity that only my friends and my doctors found paradoxical. As far as I was concerned, I was not afraid of death: it was so close—three months!—that it seemed over and done with. I was only afraid of not having enough time to finish what I had to write. At the same time, I was certain that I would succeed: three months was not much, but it was sufficient. It would *have* to suffice.

I had no idea what I was going to write and no time left to reflect. It was necessary to act; it was too late to think. All I knew was that the hero would be named Flac (a name that I had in my head for years); that it would be less a narrative than a form of music, a rhythm, a cadence for which I would have to forge my own language, and that the text would end upon the image of an old, neutered man, alone in the desert, fighting against the wind to continue reading his book.

I had to find a language, a music made of language. I plunged and let myself get absorbed—should I say *within* myself or rather *outside* myself? I do not know. In any case, it was an undecided place, more and more empty, where I sought to discern the first signs, the first notes, and the first chords. I was obsessed with Beethoven, more precisely with the Beethoven of the “Diabelli Variations,” the late quartets and the final piano sonatas. It seemed to me that these works pointed me in the direction that I wanted to go. I was listening, day and night, more and more concentrated, more and more empty, and closer and closer, for the moment when I would hear resonate within myself what Roger Laporte, citing words of unsurpassable splendor from the *Book of Kings* (XIX: 11-13), called a “voice of sheer silence.”

Nonetheless, my first steps toward the “apparition” were quickly interrupted. Without promising specific results, the doctors proposed that I undertake a course of chemotherapy. After consulting eminent specialists, I decided to give medicine its chance. The treatment began.

My case was, in principle, desperate. I received the heaviest possible course of chemotherapy. Two months later, I was nothing but a piece of human debris, more dead than dead. Writing was out of the question: I did not even have enough strength to hold a pencil between my fingers. All that I managed to do, at the price of insane effort, was to record, every now and then, a few words, one or two phrases, on a tape-recorder. Words without interest, vestiges of a time when I clung desperately to speech in order to preserve some scrap of dignity.

After six months, the doctor himself decided to bring this treatment to an end. It had produced no decisive result: only the *status quo ante*, with the same prognosis as at the beginning. An excellent man, this doctor remembered that I had spoken to him about my book project. He advised me to stop all treatment and to try to write it: “One never knows,” he concluded.

AND EVERYTHING BEGINS AGAIN AT THE END

It took me about three months to regain minimal strength, three months during which, still unable to write, I made recordings of a certain number of elementary experiences. The fact of having been exiled from the world and from myself, of having been dispossessed of normal sense perception and of the sensation of my body for several months, were experiences that rendered me hypersensitive to the return of the least impression. It was as if everything was new and practically unknown.

As soon as I was able, I sat down to write again, obsessed by the few weeks that remained to me, enraged at the idea that I could be interrupted, but also exalted by the power that I derived from the my rediscovery of language and music. I was in a rush. The first words of *FLAC* fell out of me: “Flac talks to himself. Does nothing else”—and the rest followed from them. I had no preconceived plan. I was listening and “it” was singing. And the more “it” sung, the more I felt strong and alive.

In less than four months, at the rate of two, then four to five hours per day, *FLAC* delivered itself to me and I gave myself to it, full of rage, drunkenness, and anxiety. But full of joy most of all, yes, a profound joy that no other experience had ever permitted me to attain.

While I was writing the last sentences of *FLAC* (“I am at the end. I never wanted anything other than this morning. I imagine. I mean, no, nothing. Goodbye...”), I had the profound sensation of having unburdened myself of what had made me sick. I had never felt so alive and so happy about it. Two years later, I was still there...I forced myself to conquer my former repulsion toward all medical intrusion and submitted to a series of tests. I can still hear the voice of the doctor commenting upon the results of these explorations: “Are you sure that your diagnosis is not mistaken?” From then on, my case was classed in the group of “spontaneous cures.”

I distrust diagnoses as much as prognoses. I do not know what has been cured within me and what has not—because I do not know of a satisfactory definition of the term “cure.” All that I can say is that the writing of *FLAC* had for me the effect of a rebirth. Physical rebirth, perhaps—although, on this point, the most elementary prudence and a residue of superstition prevent me from pronouncing a categorical verdict. Psychical rebirth, certainly. Therein lies, undoubtedly, the most mysterious point. I could come up with a theory, but I prefer to consider the fact, I am not sure that I am absolutely committed to elucidating it. Perhaps my desire is to let my reader, after I have furnished him with the necessary elements, see to its decipherment?

The subject who wrote *FLAC*, I did not know him beforehand. It is I and it is not I, or rather it is myself as other than myself. I am not sure how to say it. We met one another; I opened the door for him, allowed him to take his place and to guide my pen. I will not pretend that I had nothing to do with it, but I also cannot say that I recognized myself in him. It would have to say that, during the writing of this text, I discovered myself unknown to myself. Were the language to permit it, I would say that I “strangered” myself.

This subject is other than the one revealed to me by my long experience of psychoanalysis. This part of myself (if this expression is correct) is a stranger to the analysis that I pursued; it did not exist at that time; it only came to life with *FLAC*. I am convinced, however, that it is not a matter of an unanalyzed relic, of a piece of subjectivity that would have escaped my analytic experience, but rather of “something” (I am not even sure that it could be called “someone”) that psychoanalysis could not have and would not be able to bring to life.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY?

I know, of course, which are the autobiographical elements in my narrative, and I know the central fantasy of its hero. But, if *FLAC* could be read, among other ways, as an autobiographical narrative, this is only possible on the condition that one take a moment to specify what the term “autobiography” means.

In fact, I do not hesitate to qualify this narrative as autobiographical. *FLAC* is “one thousand percent” autobiographical. I mean to say: one hundred percent autobiographical, plus nine hundred percent that I made up. In *FLAC*, I treated my life in the same way that, according to Alfred Brendel, Beethoven treated Diabelli’s little waltz: “Beethoven takes Diabelli’s theme and comments on it, critiques it, improves it, parodies it, derides it, exacerbates it to the point of absurdity, lords over it, bewitches it, transfigures it, deplores it, cries over it, and crushes it under foot before making it smile.”

Within this citation, I would underscore the second to last proposition—“he crushes it under foot”—that becomes the condition of the last one—“before making it smile.” I believe that it will be as obvious to the reader of *FLAC* as it was to me that this narrative is traversed from one end to the other by a constant theme: the theme of rupture, breakage, demolition, carnage, and reduction to a thing without form and without face. This theme culminates in one passage, among others, where the fantasy of disembowelment is explicitly staged.

Beyond any interpretation that would seek to outline what breaks and what is broken, who disembowels and who is disemboweled—that is, to determine the master figures or representations of what could be reduced to an axiom of the type, “someone is being disemboweled”—I believe that it is more important to remark that this theme aims at and radically enacts the very foundation of literary creation.

Doesn’t the writer of *FLAC* finally seek to shatter, to disembowel and reduce to marmalade, the very mechanism of representation as such, or, to put it in terms more inspired by the teaching of Lacan, the structural principle that constitutes the signifier as a form of semblance? In “Lituraterre” (1971), Lacan wrote, “Nothing is more distinct from the void opened by writing than the semblance.”²¹ He thus gave a more elaborated formulation to certain propositions

that he had already advanced in his seminar on the “Ethics of Psychoanalysis.” I am thinking, in particular, of his attempt to redefine sublimation as a process that seeks to produce a signifier that would index the emptiness of the Thing beyond the lure of the object; or of his approach to creation, which begins with the gesture of the potter, as a way of introducing a gap, a hole in the real.

The constant tension in the narrative of *FLAC*, its hammering, its almost physical harassment of language, inheres in the fact that its project is, without a doubt, something quite other than an attempt to construct a representation. The text of *FLAC* bears witness to the relentless will to find, with language and against language, the path that will make it possible to overturn all the idols, all the figures, and all the semblances whereby representation props itself up.

For the one who has raised language to the level of the Thing, it is still necessary for him to prove his unlimited love for it by stamping upon it, disemboweling it, turning it to dust, in order to extract from it the unique singularity that remains when it is nothing but a formless magma, not even a cry, barely a breath. For, it is at the moment that language vacillates between decomposition and recomposition that it hits the right tone, and becomes truly real. This sort of hole driven through the continuous flood of words can only be attained intermittently and for extremely brief intervals. What is more, in order to achieve this end, there is no other means than the virtuosic ability to play upon all the lexical and syntactic artifices that language has to offer—just as it is necessary to create a raging storm made of hundreds, if not thousands of notes and musical phrases in order to make palpable a celestial silence, a finally celestial silence.

The autobiographical aspect of my narrative, and perhaps of every literary narrative, would therefore only have a very loose relation to historical veracity—if this expression has any meaning in relation to the life of a single man, a life in which facts are always subjective facts and effects of discourse. What one calls “autobiography” would, in reality, better go by the name “heterobiography.” For, what is at stake in literature is indeed the apparition of an other than oneself, an other that one believes to be oneself. An other that is most likely truer and certainly more real than the one that one was or believed oneself to have been.

The graphics of a *bios* changes this life to such an extent that it is not too much to say that, when it has been successfully captured as writing, this writing opens the perspective of a new life. Lacan was not insensitive to this phenomenon, because, in his seminar *Joyce the Sinthome*, he declared: “People write their childhood memories, and that has consequences, because it is the passage from one writing to another writing” (May 11, 1976).² I interpret this statement in the sense of a passage from an “it is written” to an “it is a writing to come.” The share of autobiography in a work does not consist of a report in which the “I” takes itself as an object. It is an exploration of the unknown in the course of which the narrator encounters, along a winding path, a sort of double who extracts him from himself and projects him beyond himself.

TO INVENT IS NOT TO KNOW

This experience, always close to *Unheimlichkeit*, both has something in common with psychoanalytic experience and is radically distinguished from it.

It is known that, in psychoanalysis, the infantile biography of the subject has always been considered the richest material for signification. Childhood memories constitute the oldest witnesses and remain closest to unconscious desires and fantasies and to the repression imposed upon them. It is remarkable that Freud, from 1909 on, preferred to designate these memories using a term that he created, “family romances” (*Familienroman*), rather than speaking of familial history. Family romance: this phrase means that the subject invents a family and a history for himself.

However, different from the novelist—who, by vocation, lies, travesties, falsifies, or keeps silent, just as much as he avows the elements of his biography—the subject in analysis (whom we call the “psychoanalysand”) does not know that he invents. More precisely, this knowledge remains inaccessible to him because it is unconscious. And only the long and patient work of analysis will allow the psychoanalysand to discover that, there where he believed that he *lived* a certain history, he had, in reality, constructed a series of fantasies, the deciphering of which will lead, in the best of outcomes, to the revelation of a fundamental fantasy.

This gain in knowledge upon which psychoanalysis ends has nothing to do with going back over one’s infantile biography. The latter might then appear to the subject who becomes its narrator as a fiction built around the kernel of the impossible-to-say that constitutes sexual difference and the sexual relation. Although the necessity for such a biography could thus be justified, and its symptomatic consequences deciphered, it cannot be taken seriously in the way it was at the beginning of an analysis. The family romance goes from being tragedy to being comedy—finally, one is allowed to smile about it.

The question of the relation of the narrator to unconscious knowledge, nonetheless, deserves to be pushed a bit further, because, in the case of *FLAC*, the author of the text is himself a psychoanalyst. He is therefore someone who has not only gone through the experience of his own analysis, but has also pursued this experience by allowing others to make use of him in order to go through it in their turn. Can such a writer be supposed to know what he is saying when he writes?

It will be remembered that, in the two major texts that he devoted to the question of artistic creation—*Delusion and Dream in Jensen’s Gradiva* (1907) and *Leonardo Da Vinci and a Memory from His Childhood* (1910)—Freud put special emphasis upon the problem of the knowledge of the artist and the knowledge of the psychoanalyst.

In the essay on *Gradiva*, he was stunned to find that the writer possessed a veritable psychoanalytic knowledge, to such an extent, he wrote, that “we should not object if *Gradiva* were described not as a phantasy but as a psychiatric study.”³ Further, Freud observes that the novelist has always a step ahead of the man of science and, in particular, of the psychoanalyst. Nonetheless, if the artist and the psychoanalyst share the same knowledge, the artist, for his part, does not want to know what he knows. That does not interest him; he might even find it repugnant. This statement, which leaves open the question of how to explain that the artist produces a work rather than repression, as the common neurotic would do, leads Freud toward the notion of sublimation—a notion which he has much trouble defining in a satisfying manner.

Freud unfolds his reflection on sublimation throughout the essay on Leonardo, where he definitively elaborates the structure of misrecognition that binds the artist to knowledge. After having confirmed the idea that the artist does not know what he knows, Freud adds that it is better that way. In order for him to make work, it is better that the artist not try to know too much, because, in a sense, knowledge constitutes an obstacle to creation.

Leonardo is a perfect illustration of this thesis. For his entire life, he was torn between the desire to know and the desire to create: “the investigator in him never in the course of his development left the artist entirely free, but often made severe encroachments on him and perhaps in the end suppressed him”; “what interested him in a picture was above all a problem; and behind the first one he saw countless other problems arising, just as he used to in his endless and inexhaustible investigation of nature. “(S.E. X, 64, 77). The inhibition of creation, which finally overtakes Leonardo, comes from the thirst for knowledge. As opposed to Jensen, the author of *Gradiva*, in whom the writer struggles against knowing what he is doing, Leonardo’s search for knowledge ultimately prevents him from painting. Leonardo is a case of the failure of sublimation.

In light of a study of the artist’s biography and particularly of a memory from childhood recounted in his autobiographical writings (the famous dream of the vulture), Freud explains Leonardo’s subjective division in terms of the conflict, insoluble for him, between the maternal Other (too present) and the paternal Other (too absent). For Leonardo, he says, the artistic work derives its inspiration from the mother—or, more precisely, in the enigmatic *jouissance* of the mother—while the scientific investigation has its source in the missing father. This opposition remains legible in Leonardo’s *Notebooks*, which contain, on the one hand, drawings of the human body that bear witness to a remarkable ignorance of female anatomy and, on the other hand, an almost delusional theory that likens the man’s sperm with mother’s milk.

Should I, all modesty aside, try to explain the difficulty of my position by establishing an analogy between my own case and that of Leonardo? In a sense, yes; but, in another, no. It is certain that, considered from one angle, the knowledge that I have been able to derive from my analytic trajectory and from my practice constitute an obstacle to my desire for literary creation.

Nonetheless, the former can also become, if not the motor, then at least the non-negligible stimulus of the latter. If it is not too audacious to say so, I believe that it is necessary to nuance Freud's speculations on the mechanism of artistic creation and to supplement them with a few reflections based both on my work as a reader and commentator of psychoanalytic texts and on what I have been able to deduce from my experience of literary creation.

THE ORIGINAL HOLE

It is not wrong to claim that knowledge and creation are fundamentally opposed to one another, in that the artist does not produce his work from his knowledge. The one who writes, composes, or paints with his knowledge can at best be a good artisan, an excellent maker, even a virtuoso of *savoir-faire* (and, of course, there is a public who demands nothing else), but he does not accede to the mystery of creation (for which a public is much rarer).

The artist creates out of what he does not know, what he cannot know: true creation has its source in the void of knowledge. This does not mean that the artist must be an ignoramus, an illiterate or a being devoid of curiosity. The thesis that Freud developed in his study of *Gradiva* and in his essay on Leonardo should be tempered in the following terms: *at the moment that he creates*, the artists does not know what he is doing.

The artist can be very knowledgeable—which is not in itself incompatible with the artistic undertaking—but when he is in the process of creation, not only does he manage to forget what he knows, he also orients himself toward a beyond of knowledge, toward that which, according to its essence, escapes knowledge. This is the undertaking that, after a certain moment, Leonardo could no longer manage, while Jensen, for his part, pursued it with remarkable obstinacy.

The misrecognition or the refusal of knowledge that seems to characterize the position of the creator deserves more precise clarification than Freud was able to provide between 1907 and 1910, a period when he was still at the very beginning of his discovery and the formulation of the fundamental hypotheses of psychoanalysis.

It is striking that, in his essay on *Gradiva*, Freud abstains from exploring a question that he had raised in passing as a crucial point for Jensen's narrative. This was the question of what place to grant, in the narrative but also in the writer's motivations, to the problem of Gradiva's corporeal essence that haunts Hanold, the hero of the novel. While the text in his hands undeniably manifest it, how did Freud not perceive that the mystery of the female body must be placed both at the center of the problematic of creation and of the notion of sublimation? In this text, Freud thus reproduces, ten years later, the failing that had prevented him from hearing, in Dora's discourse, the ineffable presence of the body of Frau K.,

and from grasping, beyond her and the representation of the Madonna that makes Dora fall into ecstasies, the prevalence of the mother-daughter relation in the female Oedipus complex and its effects of homosexualization.

Indeed, through what appear to be formations of the unconscious (dreams, delusions, and returns of the repressed), Jensen's narrative tells the story of a man who questions the nature of the feminine sex. This sex is evoked many times through the description of a strange corporeal posture, through the encounter with a fissure that is difficult, if not impossible, to repair, by which Zoe, Gradiva's double, appears and disappears, and finally, at the end of the story, through the enigma of a "small crater on her cheek where something minimal and difficult to determine took place."

In this way, the knowledge shared by the artist and the psychoanalyst is not so much a knowledge about the repressed and its mechanisms of repression, but is rather a question about the unknowable of the feminine sex. But it is true that, on this point, the relation between Freud and Jensen is inverted: in his nonknowledge, through his nonknowledge, Jensen shows that he knows more than Freud. He surpasses Freud, as Freud himself recognizes, but he surpasses him much more than Freud suspects. This staging of femininity as impossible to grasp does not only precede the Freud of 1907, but even the Freud of the 1930s who will speak of femininity as a "dark continent"!

What Jensen knew—without knowing that he knew it, but not without putting it to work in his writing—is that the impossible-to-say of sexual difference and of femininity is the place par excellence of invention and the mainspring of literary creation. This impossible-to-say is the cause of a hole in knowledge, a hole that the artist endeavors to keep empty.

This hole is also the motor of Freud's obstinate investigations of Freud who, curiously, finds himself in a position analogous to the one that he had described in the case of Leonardo. For, to want absolutely to know, to want to know everything, Freud deprives himself—and the course of his work will prove it—of discovering the impossible to know. Is it chance or is it the result of Freud's own unconscious that, the year after he writes this essay on *Gradiva*, he will produce his famous article on "infantile sexual theories," an article that shows that the unconscious remains forever ignorant of the feminine sex?

Indeed, it would seem that one must conclude that Freud himself did not know the real object of his discovery at the moment when he was reading and commenting on the text of *Gradiva*. This is why, when writing this postface to *FLAC* with the pen of a psychoanalyst, I can no longer hide my radical incapacity to take the position of the reader and a fortiori of the analyst of the text of *FLAC* that came from another pen.

The relation between the knowledge of the psychoanalyst and the invention of the artist is therefore more complex than Freud imagined between 1907 and 1910. The knowledge that derives

from analytic experience is not simply a positive knowledge that consists in understanding unconscious processes and the procedures of their deciphering. If it is accurate to say that the artist is always in advance of us, it is because our psychoanalytic knowledge is also, perhaps above all, a negative knowledge. This is the essence of what the psychoanalyst and the artist have to share with one another.

At the end of analysis, we know a certain number of things, but we know above all what we do not know and will always not know. This ignorance is not the mark of impotence on the part of the psychoanalysand, the psychoanalyst, or psychoanalysis. On the contrary, it bears witness to the power of the experience itself to the extent that it manages definitively to trace the limit of the symbolic in relation to the order of the impossible: the impossible-to-say as cause of everything that is said, seeks to be said, fails to be said, or exhausts itself in being said.

The experience of the unconscious leads finally to a relativization of itself. For, the ultimate revelation of psychoanalysis is this: the unconscious itself is structured like a fictional knowledge from which all the subject's constructions are built and interlace in a tight network of an infinite complexity around a central void, around a point that absolutely refuses all inscription and all knowing. The unconscious is a "knowledge full of holes," as Lacan said in his last seminars, full of holes like language itself.

This originary hole, that Freud approached before Lacan did when he spoke of *Urverdrängung* (an unsatisfactory term because there is, here, nothing to repress), is at the end of analysis and the beginning of writing. Aim of speech, source of writing. This is why Lacan remarks that Joyce would have gained nothing from going through psychoanalysis, because "he had already reached the best that one can expect of psychoanalysis at its end."⁴ The meeting between the psychoanalyst and the writer cannot be defined in terms of shared unconscious knowledge—a knowledge that the first would have acquired through the long and patient work of being a psychoanalysand, while the second gained misrecognized use of through the trick of sublimation that spares him the cost of repression. The point where they meet corresponds to a gap in the unconscious, the impossible-to-say and the impossible-to-write (for, Lacan defines the impossible as "what does not cease not to be written").

SHATTERING THE SLEEP OF THE WORD

However, this encounter between psychoanalysis and writing does not make them similar nor, a fortiori, does it show that they occupy identical positions. Beyond the relation to knowledge, to the failure of knowledge, and to the hole in knowledge, there is the relation to language. On this level, the experience of psychoanalysis and that of writing diverge or even oppose one another.

Psychoanalysis and literature certainly each find their material, their substance, and their cause in the play of the linguistic signifier. They are both modes of saying. Nonetheless, the written text is not a variant of speech, especially when it is a matter of literary writing—which one can distinguish from scientific writing and the “mathematical” writing that Lacan sought to elaborate in order to help rationalize the transmission of psychoanalytic doctrine.

Writing and psychoanalysis do not take hold of the signifier from the same side: poetics is not rhetoric (according to one of Lacan’s last sayings, “the psychoanalyst is a rhetor”—seminar of November 15, 1977). While the psychoanalytic experience is fundamentally an experience of speech that unfolds completely in and through speech, literary writing, for its part, goes against speech.

Writing is not only distinguished by the form it derives from the material fact of inscription on a support. The distance that separates writing from speech is much more radical. Writing consists, in reality, in a true insurrection against speech, against this incessant tumult that invades us at once from inside and from outside, against this “speaking immensity that addresses itself to us even as it turns away from us” (Maurice Blanchot, in *The Book to Come*). It would not be excessive to affirm that writing wants to break from language (this is what Blanchot designates appropriately as the *movement beyond measure of writing*), even if it is with the help of language and by means of language that the writer seeks to create this break.

The writer, it must be said, suffers from speech and language as such, to the point that he sometimes feels persecuted by them. Madness and writing come closest to one another at this point. The writer’s torment derives from the property of the signifier that psychoanalysis, from its side, emphasizes in speech: the fact that it is a semblance. Therefore, when psychoanalysis aims to reduce suffering speech, if not speech as such, to its essence as a semblance, as a “para-being” (*par-être*), to use Lacan’s word, the writer, for his part, seeks precisely that which in the signifier is *not* a semblance. Writing is driven by the vow to attain the flesh of words, the matter of language, the body of the signifier.

Without a doubt, one will object that there are any number of writers (in fact the majority of them) who, apparently, do not resent nor recognize this persecution. Such writers are the narrators, the tellers of beautiful or horrible stories. There are people who, Freud says in “Creative Writers and Daydreaming” [1909], have always remained children. For them, as adults, literary creation constitutes the pursuit of games and waking reveries through which the child, then the adolescent, invent an imaginary world that they take seriously. Such writers clothe their phantoms in pleasing masks to seduce their readers and to exculpate us of the shame that we all feel (unless we are perverts) about our fantasies. These are writers who seek to soothe the reader, as Freud remarks. But also—and this fact does not escape Freud either—the genre of work that these storytellers produce exercises a specific effect upon the writer: a hypnotic effect. These are writers who put the reader to sleep, who make him dream, and consequently restrain him from

going beyond the limit of the pleasure principle and help him to avoid venturing beyond the reassuring framework of the daydream.

It is certain that, today no less than yesterday, the immense majority of readers do not ask for more than this; they remain satisfied with the appeasement that the writer-storyteller procures for him. How many readers, after all, read before going to sleep, the book for them fulfilling the function of a sleeping pill, much like the stories that our parents used to tell us when we were children and we demanded a “story before bed.”

In such cases, one should indeed wonder whether it is still legitimate to speak of “reading,” if this activity becomes nothing other than the consumption of a product that is more and more often fabricated in a standardized image designed for the use of precisely this type of reader—whom I would call “passive readers.” Shouldn’t reading, true reading, like writing itself, be an action, a conquest, a total engagement that pertains to the sacred tradition of hospitality? On this point, I would not dream for a second of equaling the luminous pages that George Steiner has written on the act of reading, on “creative reading,” in his book *No Passion Spent*. I will only cite, with great fervor, a single sentence: “But the principal truth is this: latent in every act of complete reading is the compulsion to write a book in reply.”⁵

It is thus possible to ask whether the thesis that Freud advances in “Creative Writers and Daydreaming” represents everything that psychoanalysis has to say about the act of literary creation. I doubt it. Freud takes care to alert us to the limits of his reflections: the writers whom he addresses are not those “most highly esteemed by the critics, but the less pretentious authors of novels, romances and short stories, who nevertheless have the widest and most eager circle of readers” (*S.E.* IX, 149)—in other words, these are popular writers, those whom today are called, in the context of the literary marketplace, “bestsellers.” Freud distinguishes these writers from the epic and tragic poets and their successors whose works revolve around themes given in advance by folkloric and legendary traditions. But, after creating this second category, he immediately shows that the works of this second type of writer also tend to become the extension of a waking dream, because the myths that inspire it are nothing less than the deformed remainders of the fantasies of entire nations, “the *secular dreams* of youthful humanity” (*S.E.* IX, 152).

Only in passing, almost in the form of a mere allusion, does Freud evoke the possibility that there is a third type of writer: “excentric” writers, to whom he devotes three sentences (citing Zola as an example!). It is quite obvious that, in 1909, the mutation of modern literature was only in its nascent stages and we gladly excuse Freud for being ignorant of works that had yet to appear. We will never know what he would have thought of writers such as James Joyce, Marcel Proust, Samuel Beckett, or William Burroughs, only to mention a few names. And we suppose that he only had vague and indirect access to the works of Cervantes

and to Rabelais. But I cannot help being stunned that, at no moment in “Creative Writers and Daydreaming,” do I come across even the shadow of the great William Shakespeare, whose work Freud knew particularly well. Did Freud—like Wittgenstein after him—consider Shakespeare to be a *Sprachschöpfer* (a forger of words, a creator of language) rather than a *Dichter*? But what, after all, is a *Dichter*?

OPPOSED TO DICTATION

No, I am decidedly not satisfied with Freud’s definition the writer and even less with his definition of writing. I am not even persuaded that the writer-storyteller remains content to do nothing but embellish a waking reverie. I have shown, for example, in a study of Victor Hugo that, if he can be considered as a writer of the fantasy, his work is nonetheless haunted by the menacing presence of the unknown, of the “monstrous abyss full of enormous billows of smoke,” the “mouth of shadows” from which he conjures real apparitions with a quasi-maniacal graphomania.

In the same way, it would not be difficult to apprehend the theme of the apparition of the real, the intrusion of a beyond of language, in the work of writers such as Edgar Allen Poe, Henry James, and Jorge Luis Borges. Isn’t the so-called *fantastic* in literature precisely the dimension of a presence that, even under the mask of a language that seems to remain utterly classical, exceeds the reassuring framework of the dream and the fantasy? What finally surprises me the most in Freud, when he goes out of his way to reduce literary creation to the mechanism of the dream, is that he does not draw the extreme conclusions from this thesis, to evoke the nightmare or the navel of the dream.

I thus have a theory of literature—or, to express myself less pretentiously, I have a certain idea of what literature is or should be, a certain idea, in any case, of what I call “writing.” The framework of this postface is probably not appropriate to elaborate all the developments that would be necessary to clarify this idea. I will therefore limit myself to explicating the main points.

To state it briefly, I believe that writing is directly opposed to the effect that Freud attributes to the work of the storyteller: its primordial function is *to awaken*. To awaken, first of all, the one who delivers himself over to this strange, singular, and solitary task that is writing, and then—but this is only a hope, perhaps only an illusory wish—to awaken the good reader who welcomes the result of this secret and sometimes furious fencing match with language. This is why I am convinced that the writer, and especially the writer of today, without being entrusted with a “mission” that he would be conscious of and without being a militant for any cause, is called—whether he knows it or not, whether he wants it or not—to become the redeemer of the contemporary world.

Redeemer: the word is strong, doubtless a bit solemn and seemingly exhumed from the tomb of a time and a way of speaking that we have almost entirely forgotten (much as Joyce considered

himself to be the “redeemer” of the uncreated conscience of his race). Nonetheless, it does not seem to me to be outrageous. If it is shocking, too bad—or so much the better...

I do not believe, as do certain contemporary philosophers, whose debate, according to Georges Steiner, was initiated by Wittgenstein’s critique of Shakespeare, that the true *Dichter* is characterized by knowledge of the moral act *par excellence*; nor that the essence of true *Dichtung* is to bear witness; nor, as Canetti upholds, that he must take responsibility in relation to life (“Had I been a better *Dichter*, I could have stopped this war or halted this massacre”⁶). And if I tend to agree with Heidegger, for whom the *Dichter* is, *par excellence*, the *shepherd of being*, I do not deduce from this thesis that the writer *must* feel inspired by any ethical obligation whatsoever.

The word “ethics” for me suggests a reserve, a perplexity, or even a kind of repulsion, all the more explicit to the extent that it has become a tic that marks the thought of the times in which we live. There is no domain left today that can escape the severe warnings of the pseudo-intelligentsia who claim, with the grave voice of academic authority, or with the jackal-like cries of a new puritanism, that one must justify oneself with an “ethics.” After having given the sciences warning that they must heed the tables of good intentions, the “ecolo-ethical” movement is going around claiming today that someone should control the way we drive our cars—as if the rules of the road were not enough! When will there be an ethics of fucking? Or, after that, an ethics of lipstick?

The neo-puritanism that flares up around the word “ethics” is only the mark of a misrecognition, or even a censorship of desire. It is not the *Dichter*’s ethics that raises questions, but rather his desire. What is the desire to write? George Steiner advances, with good reason, that “disposer of a vocabulary of almost thirty thousand words (Racine’s world is built of one tenth that number), Shakespeare, more than any other human being of whom we have certain record, has made the world at home in the word.”⁷ He thus insists less upon responsibility, doctrine, or ministry, than upon the exceptional measurelessness of a desire that supports the demiurgic act of naming what is—but that is also, above all, the desire to situate language within writing as the field of its *jouissance*.

Steiner is then certainly right when he remarks that a man or a woman could not lead their life by following the example or the precepts of Shakespeare in the same way that they could if they followed Tolstoy. But must the writer worry about offering precepts? Whence could he possibly derive such a power, or merely such a right? In one chapter of my book, *L’Imposture pervers*, I attempted to clarify the hidden workings of the novels of Louis-Ferdinand Céline. Céline is an extreme example (although there are others: I could cite Jean Genet or Marcel Johandeau) who shows the vanity of any ethical exigency within the domain of literature. For, Céline is at once one of the greatest writers in the history of literature and one of the most ignoble bastards in the history of humanity. Should we consider this fact as a paradox? I leave

this question for everyone to answer for himself. However, if my reader was tempted to answer in the affirmative (as Wittgenstein or Canetti would have done), I would have him observe that he seems to think, perhaps without realizing it, that the writer can only be a gentleman...

It is only possible, finally, to do justice to the work of Céline, or to the work of any true writer, if one speaks like Steiner about Shakespeare: “Are Shakespeare’s characters, at the last, more than Magellanic clouds of verbal energy turning around a void, around an absence of truth or moral substance?”⁸ To debate whether it is possible to know if verbal creation suffices to earn one the title of “*Dichter*” seems to me a dead end. To demand more of a writer than verbal creation is to demand that he be more than a writer.

If writing actually serves a salvational function, it is not because of some moral example that he would be charged with circulating, but precisely because he is endowed with a power to renew language and the relation to language. It is quite possible that, in the hurly-burly that it inflicts upon language, writing runs the risk of something that comes close to barbarism. But are we so sure that barbarism is the same thing as savagery, disorder, violence, murder or obscenity? Isn’t there a barbarism worse than the chaos introduced into the perfectly organized arrangement of language, into the proper and purified lexicon, into the syntax of well-oiled articulations, as into the perfectly bureaucratized hierarchy of the world?

The world in which the writer and the reader live today is characterized by the proliferation of an incessant discourse, made all the more overwhelming by the technology placed at the disposal of the forces that direct it or simply channel it, allowing it to intrude into our lives almost without any limit, to impose itself upon our eyes and ears at every moment and in every place, and to accompany our smallest quotidian gestures with a more implacable force than any dictator ever managed to deploy.

One calls it “information” or “communication” when, in fact, it is obviously the contrary. One tries to make us believe that someone has something to tell us, but one never utters anything but empty words, slogans, refrains, or, when one does actually say something to us, it is said in such a way that the message is immediately nullified, rendered inaudible or illegible by the deluge of babble that surrounds it, neutralizes it, or banalizes it. Who is this “one”? No one is in a position to know, since, in order to know, it would be necessary to accumulate still more of this “information,” stock and analyze millions of discourses. It is even probable that this “one” hides within some random “he.” The master today is an anonymous and faceless master. If one looks hard enough, one might believe one saw him appear momentarily among the stock quotes on Wall Street, in Tokyo or elsewhere. But the next instant, one will realize that these quotes themselves are determined by an infinite series, made of bits of information, rumors and “scoops” that no one can even pretend to control.

The speaking-machine now keeps going all by itself. The gigantic, omnipresent, and self-generating discourse that results from it, this noise, from which we can no longer escape, has the effect of deafening us, blinding us, and dulling our capacity to be shocked by language; it vaccinates us against language's powers of illumination, slowly anesthetizes our faculties of critique, discernment, and opinion. Like objects of consumption, the symbolic is henceforth condemned to be used up faster and faster. As it proliferates, discourse produces a withering away of words and the very function of speech. We are thus led quietly (even though it is a matter of the greatest violence every exercised upon the human being) toward a universe where everything can be said (and will be said, no doubt) in any way by anyone, because no one wants anything to be said differently; toward a universe in which, under cover of communication between anyone and everyone and everyone and anyone, nothing will be said that is worth saying, except the litany of vain speech and public discourse that will relentlessly inject us in a million ways with a single message: "Listen! and sleep, little man..." Contrary to what Freud could think in 1909, it is not the writer who perpetuates the dream, and thus sleep, but rather the discourse of the world.

Perhaps the writer is today the only one who can offer us the chance to cut a breach in the formidable and unified prison-house of language and of the standardized fantasy in which we are locked by the dictatorship of public discourse. "Dictatorship," I recall, is derived from the Latin *dictatura*, which signifies: dictation to schoolchildren. Perhaps the psychoanalyst can come to the writer's aid, in his way. Perhaps. I do not know whether it is still possible to hope so, because the writing that awakens is presently more and more suffocated by the unchecked production of books that have nothing to do with literature—books that are at home in supermarkets and are conceived and fabricated to be trashed after a single use. As for psychoanalysis, its avant-garde now declares that it aspires to world conquest, a uniform doctrine and the submission of practitioners to the empire of a single discourse, instead of encouraging and interrogating the singularity of each vocation, welcoming heresy (a term to which Lacan granted a place in his teaching) and favoring the singular faculty of critique. If I write these lines, it is because I have not yet resigned myself, but it sometimes occurs to me to ask myself if it wouldn't be more lucid stoically to envisage the possibility that the writer, much like the psychoanalyst, is a species on the way to extinction.

"A VOICE OF SHEER SILENCE"

"He said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.' Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting the mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind and earthquake,

but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a voice of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave” (1 Kings 19: 11-13).

I advanced the thesis that the experiences of writing and of psychoanalysis are far enough from one another that they are practically opposed. But it is now time to return to this affirmation and to introduce some nuances; for, as opposed as they are, these two experiences remain linked.

A first observation immediately imposes itself. If the psychoanalyst wants to *make speak*, writing seeks to *make silent*. Writing is only possible if silence can be forced upon the harassing noise of exterior discourse and the equally wearying verbiage of the subject’s interior discourse. If he could, the writer would silence language itself—such is the secret of the desire to murder and the desire to die (the two faces of the same wish to be done with what language gives and imposes upon us) that inhabits the very movement of writing. To write is firstly to want to kill, not to kill life, but what allows us to know that we are living beings and thereby colonizes us and deprives us of a part of life for which there is no word other than, for example, “the Eternal.”

The writer is certainly a dangerous man: he is, in a certain sense, a social sense, an enemy of the pact of speech. This is why it is not madness to persecute him, to censure him or to want to exclude him from the City. His own pact, if I may express myself in rather extremist terms, is a pact with silence. In silence, he finds his inspiration and it gives him the strength to reorganize, to sharpen his pen, to force and to outrage common language.

But what is silence? It is not simply the absence of language—a point that is definitively beyond our reach; it is rather a hole, an empty space, an accident, a cut at the very heart of language. Perhaps I could use Freud’s term from *The Interpretation of Dreams*: the *navel* of the dream. Such is the substance of what Joyce called his “epiphanies.” The epiphany—the apparition, in the religious sense of the term—is, for Joyce, a fragment of heard or reported discourse in which he suddenly discerns this silent hole that seems to aspirate language or to make it revolve around itself as a cyclone around its eye, and that, in the briefest instant of illumination, reduces language to nothing. The epiphany is the blinding revelation that the *meaning-to-say* of all discourse is nothing but the ridiculous grimace that covers, like a carnival mask, the *nothing-to-say* that is the real essence of discourse—for, before the Eternal, only the nothing can subsist. It thus becomes necessary to find an absolutely singular saying that will re-create language *ex nihilo*.

As a rupture with language—with the language of representation and meaning—writing offers no bearings for interpretation. It is uninterpretable; it refers to nothing but the void, to the nothing on which it nourishes itself. This is why psychoanalysis cannot enlighten us about what the experience of writing is. On the contrary, when it deals with this experience, it only obscures it by treating it as speech and approaching it with its impotent and inadequate discourse. Psychoanalysis can elucidate what writing produces; it can, on pertinent occasions, propose a reading of this product; but it cannot say anything about what writing *is*.

It would thus be best to invert the relation between writing and psychoanalysis that has been naively established under a regime of habit and complacent, inert, and negligent thinking. It is not psychoanalysis that interprets writing; it is writing that can be upheld as an interpretation of psychoanalysis. More precisely: it is an interpretation of the *end* through which psychoanalysis tries to bring itself to completion.

LACAN'S FAILURE: "I AM NOT ENOUGH OF A POET"

I have said that the primordial function of writing is to awaken. This is also the goal that Lacan determined for psychoanalysis. If Lacan spoke of "awakening," it was to signify to his fellow psychoanalysts that their practice only makes sense to the extent that it leads the psychoanalyst and to break through the imaginary frame within which his unconscious desire remains imprisoned and, more generally, to find access to the real beyond the waking dream within which we lead our lives.

Lacan upheld this thesis for many years and put it into action through an entirely original and often disconcerting technique of interpretation. This technique made a point of always being surprising and enigmatic, unexpected and untimely, and of going against the grain of any understanding or illusion of a shared meaning. I would hypothesize that, in his way, Lacan attempted, within his resolutely singular practice, to attain the place and time of the experience of writing or, at least, to establish something analogous to it in the field of speech. In a sense, he sought—this is, at least, the conviction that I have derived from my long engagement with his seminars and his writings—to elevate the experience of speech to the level of the operation of writing.

For, Lacan, much like the writer, wanted to make silent as much as he wanted to make speak. The speech that he waited for, what he wished to see born from the analytic experience, was a new speech, previously unheard of. It was a speech whose primary condition would have been to reduce the babbling, the "blablabla" of common discourse, if not to silence, then at least to the status of insubstantial vanity; a speech that would finally have the incontestable consistency of a response of the real.

And it is certainly not by chance that he devoted the final ten years of his seminar to elaborating what he called "mathemes" (formulae written in the form of an algebra or formal logic), his "topology" (a displaced usage of a few geometric curiosities familiar to mathematicians), or even his "borromean knots" (loops of string knotted in such a way that untying one of them would undo all the others—which, at a certain moment, he maintained were not metaphors, but *were* the real itself).

Therefore, in the last of his seminars, Lacan turned more and more toward the written, going so far as to leave behind the theory of the signifier—which had, for the twenty previous years, been his war horse—in order to engage the theory and the practice of the letter, which

came to occupy all his attention, to the point of leading him into an almost total mutism during the last two years of the seminar, years during which he limited himself to drawing borromean knots and interlacing toruses on the board before an increasingly empty auditorium.

For his students, as well as for those who looked to the most recent developments in psychoanalysis to illuminate other disciplines, the final four or five years of Lacan's seminar remain an enigma whose secret no one has yet penetrated. Only respect and modesty keep us from qualifying this enigma as a shipwreck, although Lacan himself explicitly avowed his failure. But might this failure turn out, when we have understood it, to have been more fecund for thought than a success? In any case, perhaps it was inevitable, to the extent that, as Lacan recalled throughout his teaching, the unconscious only reveals itself in the dimension of unsuccess.

No matter one's opinion about this question, it seems to me of capital importance to stress that the first indices of this failure appeared, in 1975-76, at the moment when Lacan decided to measure himself against someone who was, without a doubt, the greatest writer of the 20th Century: James Joyce. The confrontation between these giants, which took place during the year of the seminar, *Joyce the Sinthome*, is both grandiose and pathetic. One discovers, in this seminar, for the first time, a hesitant Lacan, doubting himself, lacking assurance in his own formulations, a Lacan who goes astray, commits errors in his schemas and desperately seeks support from certain members of his audience.

This was the seminar that saw the collapse of the splendid find upon which Lacan had founded, since 1972, all of his hopes of completing his theoretical edifice: the famous triple-loop "borromean knot" (it consists of three loops of string knotted together so that, if one cuts one of the knots, the two others also become untied). This triple-loop borromean knot was supposed to condense in a single writing the whole theory of the relation between the categories *Real-Symbolic-Imaginary* (abbreviated, R.S.I.) and, with this theory, the place and functions of jouissance, the phallus, *object a*, the symptom, and so on. It is not excessive to say that the borromean knot was something like a new form of the Trinity; for, in April 1975, Lacan once again gave a talk in Rome (the symbolic place par excellence), a triumphant discourse in which all of his reflections on psychoanalysis were subsumed under the construction of this new writing.

Alas! This superb invention came to grief upon his interrogation of the work and the personality of Joyce. Lacan is led to the point (reluctantly, one could feel it) of stating that Joyce constitutes an irremediable objection to this triple-loop knot. This knot was ultimately a failure: his analysis of Joyce revealed a hitch in the knotting of the three loops of the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary. Joyce constrains Lacan to conclude that the symptom cannot be englobed within his triple-loop knot. From that point on, the construction of the borromean knot can only be achieved through tinkering: it is a failed knot that only holds when it is pieced together by adding a fourth loop. Joyce's Ego, the Ego of the writer (which, according to Lacan's reading, functioned

to protect Joyce from a psychosis that originated with the radical absence of his father) obliged Lacan to avow his failure or, at the very least, to encounter his limit. The encounter between these two titans is an uncommon intellectual adventure; and it is all the more fascinating because it shows that it was in relation to the question of writing that the most audacious psychoanalytic research found itself stalled and condemned to avow its impotence.

In the course of the following years, Lacan turned around in circles. He explicitly confessed as much himself, being the first one to have a clear consciousness of his own failure. Now, he said, I do not find, I seek... Redoubling his obstinacy, but also his obscurity, he continued to speculate on borromean knots, which transformed themselves into “borromean chains,” tresses, knotted toruses turned inside out—but with hardly any satisfying results.

His seminar of 1977 is shot through with admissions of failure and words of impotent hope. Lacan feels, from then on, the necessity to create “a new signifier,” a signifier that would not have, like the real, any kind of meaning. But he also observes that this necessity defines the irremediable cut that separates the psychoanalyst from the poet or, in any case, the psychoanalyst from poetry. During his seminar of April 19, 1977, Lacan declares: “To be eventually inspired by something on the order of poetry in order to intervene as a psychoanalyst? Indeed, this is the direction in which one must turn...” But almost one month later, he closes the door that he had barely opened, making this admirable and pathetic confession to his audience: “Only poetry, as I have already told you, allows for interpretation. This is why I can no longer attain, in my technique, what it offers. I am not enough of a poet (*assez poète*). I am not *poâte-assez*” (May 17, 1977).

Even more seriously: after having once again invoked his hope for a new signifier that would break the chain of received signifiers, Lacan makes the following statement, of such radical pessimism that it would seem to ruin, in two sentences, all the meaning that Lacan had, for sixty years, invested in psychoanalytic practice: “The mental illness that is the unconscious does not reveal itself. What Freud said, and what I mean to say, is this—in no case is there ever awakening” (May 17, 1977). Before sinking into the strange mutism of his seminars from 1978 and 1979, he will throw out his ultimate expression of a desperate wish: “What’s necessary is that analysis, through a supposition, should manage to undo through speech what has been wrought in speech” (November 15, 1977).

I MEAN TO SAY, NO, NOTHING

Lacan’s mutism, over the last two years of his seminar—a mutism that he finally broke only in 1980 to announce the dissolution of the *École Freudienne de Paris* that he founded in 1964—poses a question of great weight to psychoanalysts (but not only to them). In keeping obstinately silent, refusing to offer his audience anything other than the signs of writing with

which he covered the blackboard, did Lacan mean something or rather did he mean nothing? Or was this “not saying anything,” at the point that Lacan had reached, the most radical form of “meaning to say”?

My questioning here crosses the bottomless abyss opened by Melville in his story *Bartleby the Scrivener*. Affected by his copyist’s work, Bartleby obstinately declines every demand to finish his task with a laconic remark, to which he adds neither commentary nor explication: “I would prefer not to” (in French, it reads, *je préférais ne pas*, an unsatisfactory translation because it elides the “to” in the English, which both opens toward the verb and leaves it in suspense). Lacan did not even pronounce such a sentence. He formulated and repeated his appeal for a new signifier, and then he fell silent, resolutely turned his back to his audience and riveted himself to the blackboard, chalk in hand. The word *écrits* which he made into the ironic title of the collection of texts that he published in 1966, assumed, from then on, a very enigmatic cast.

This enigma of the final Lacan returns me to my brief allusion to Joyce’s epiphanies. In the “meaning to say” of common discourse, Joyce discerned the hole of a “nothing to say” that he felt to be the very essence of the speaking function. But he also understood that this essence could only be approached and manifested in writing. In the fragment of a letter, whose date I do not know, Diderot relates an experience analogous to that of Joyce through a series of images: “I regard a certain spoken or written word as a hole suddenly pierced in my door, through which I see the entire interior of the apartment, much like a ray that suddenly illuminates the depths of a cavern and is then extinguished.”

To body forth this “nothing to say” or to this hole of language is perhaps the most important task of writing, a quasi-sacred task that it monopolizes. Would this nothing—which is not the absence of something but, on the contrary, the massive presence of that which cannot be contained by the category of “something,” because it pertains, by nature, to what cannot be said without being automatically negated by speech—would it be the obscure object of the desire to write?

In psychoanalysis, we are familiar with a type of patient who has a special affinity with the nothing: anorexics. Refusing to feed himself, the anorexic does not so much show that he does not want anything, but rather that he absolutely wants nothing. Anorexia is an expression of the absolute of desire and the demonstration that no object exists which could respond to this absolute. The anorexic makes himself, as it were, into the champion of desire. For, desire cannot by essence be satisfied with any object that is supposed to satisfy it. Such an object is always consumable, precarious, and thus incapable of offering more than provisional, passing, and partial satisfaction (which is why anorexia elects to fixate on the alimentary object). Any object offered to satisfy desire can only solicit the disappointed verdict: “it is not that.” For this reason, the anorexic transforms the structural unsatisfaction of desire into a tragedy, opposing a categorical refusal to the false seduction of the object. This refusal must be understood as the most exigent

expression of desire: the desire of nothing, because only the nothing can respond to the infinity of desire, which is not desire for any positive object, but rather the desire indefinitely to maintain itself as desire. At the limit, the anorexic satisfies himself with his hunger rather than its satiation; he maintains himself in a constant state of appetite.

The structure of anorexia—especially when we afford it the full signification that the term “mental anorexia” confers upon it (“anorexia in relation to the mental sphere,” as Lacan interprets the term)—seems to be closely linked to the problematic of writing in its relation to speech and discourse.

The writer is basically a case of mental anorexia. He suffers and derives enjoyment from a form of anorexia (because he cultivates it as something precious) that crystallizes around speech rather than food. He does not want to speak; he refuses to be satisfied with speech; he does not want to feed upon the ordinary, standardized words that speech invites him to share, not to mention the stuffing that common discourse seeks to impose upon him. It is not that he feels any desire to say anything, nor that he voluntarily wants to abstain. On the contrary, the desire to say is never as imperious as it is in the writer. His desire is to say something absolutely other; to say something that would not be assimilable, digestible, absorbable by the universal flood of speech and common discourse; something that would not be immediately comprehensible; something purely singular, an enigmatic and unique saying; something that resists the banalization of “normal” exchange and dialogue. However, for precisely this reason, the writer begins by refusing speech and the social link that it institutes.

The inventor of a revolutionary style of writing that has often—wrongly—been confused with the irruption of spoken language into writing, Louis-Ferdinand Céline explains his approach to writing in *Conversations with Professor Y*.⁹ At the end of what is presented to the reader under the auspices of a spoken dialogue, Céline makes a fundamental confession: “I was extremely tired...me, it is speaking that fatigues me...I do not like to speak...I hate speech...nothing is more extenuating...”

For the writer, this refusal of speech and of discourse (which is the sense of “making silent” and of the “saying nothing” that I evoked earlier) functions as the expression of an absolute desire for language and for the purely singular link of reading. He wants to say nothing, nothing other than saying. If my point here seems obscure or excessive to some of my readers, I hope they will pardon me and accept my invitation to discover or rediscover Franz Kafka’s “A Hunger Artist,” a text that is, like Melville’s *Bartleby*, one of the most luminous jewels of literature.

At the end of this story, the hunger artist, utterly weakened and forgotten by everyone, implores forgiveness because he made the mistake of wanting to be admired by the public for his fast. Kafka thus expresses at once the profound misunderstanding that comes between the writer and the reader, and the exorbitant expectations that the former has of the latter.

For, the author, at least when he has the mettle of a Kafka, refuses to be admired for the wrong motives; he does not, at any cost, want to dupe his public. One tends naïvely to believe that a writer wants success; but his desire to be read is much larger, as immeasurable as the exigency embodied in the work of writing itself: the author wants *the success that he deserves*.

Kafka writes: “It was not the hunger artist who was cheating, he was working honestly, but the world was cheating him of his reward.” When the inspector of the circus, who discovers the hunger artist, forgotten in his cage under a pile of straw, asks him: “But why shouldn’t we admire your fast?”, the hero responds, “Because I have to fast, I can’t help it.” The inspector (who obviously represents the average reader) is then even more stunned: “What a fellow you are! Why can’t you help it?” “Because,” the hunger artist/writer responds, “I couldn’t find the food I liked. If I had found it, believe me, I should have made no fuss and stuffed myself like you or anyone else.”¹⁰ If we replace, in this metaphor, the word “food” with “words,” we then obtain the purest expression of the writer’s relation to the words of the language.

WHY THE WRITER IS A WOMAN

The writer’s absolute desire constitutes the surest testimony that the writer has a relation to language that deserves to be qualified as erotic—in the amorous sense as well as the rawest sexual sense (in any case, as everyone knows, love has a great number of variants). Whether he is in love with lexicon and syntax, the music of words or the articulation of sentences, the writer seduces and conquers language (or rather is seduced and conquered by it), pouring it into the body of the letter. The letter fills precisely the role of the partner in the sexual relation. Literally, the writer makes love with the letter. But this is still a trivial statement: we all know, at least intuitively, that literary practice implies a total libidinal investment.

It is perhaps less obvious that, in this sexual relation to the letter, the writer is led, unbeknownst to himself or sometimes with his deliberate consent, to adopt a position that can be qualified as “feminine.” Freud did not have any idea about this feminization of the letter, although Lou-Andréas Salomé and (through her mediation) Rainer Maria Rilke provided him with the guiding thread that might have led him to it. Lacan, however, did have a presentiment of it. He even explicitly spoke the formula (in his “Seminar on the Purloined Letter” [1956], and then in his article “Lituraterre” [1971]), although he did not explicate it.

If the letter “feminizes” the one who devotes himself to it, it is because the letter incarnates (in the strong sense of the term) a subjective position that consists in situating the *not-all* within speech, within the logic of signification, and therefore within the empire of phallic sexuation—the phallus being, to reprise Lacan’s definition, “the signifier of all the effects of the signified.” The letter derives its power and its attraction less from what it vehiculates (its content, its message)

than from what it is beyond what it can signify. It has one foot in the register of speech (because it is obviously caught within the play of the signifier), but it also has a foot—and this is what distinguishes it as writing—in the beyond of speech. In fact, the letter only justifies its own existence to the extent that it seeks to go beyond the limits of speech, to the extent that it aims to give life and material form to what cannot be attained by speech. The letter thus occupies the same position as the one that has fallen to woman (“the woman does not exist,” according to Lacan’s famous formula) thanks to the ineluctably phallic logic of speech.

Much as the Delphic Oracle opens in response to the speech of Apollo, the writer, even before he is a “wordsmith” (*Sprachschöpfer*), makes himself into the addressee of this feminizing letter. He welcomes, he receives, he opens within himself the empty receptacle in which the letter finds a habitat where it can inscribe itself, deposit itself, and produce its resonances. “We could easily be made to believe that nothing has happened, and yet we have changed, as a house changes into which a guest has entered. We cannot say who has come, perhaps we shall never know.”¹¹ What one calls “inspiration” is a form of insemination, a fecundation that necessitates, on the part of the writer, an opening, an abandonment, a complete giving of himself to the mysterious and capricious feminine visitor, because she only delivers herself into the hands of the one who has first proven that he can offer himself body and soul upon her approach. “It is pour this fruit that the young girls/leap up as a tree can to a lute/and that boys have the dreams of men” (Rilke again). One can thus understand why psychoanalysis was long tempted to postulate the existence of a fantasy of pregnancy in anyone who felt called to write (indeed, Lacan himself evokes this fantasy).

On this point, psychoanalysis is not wrong. Besides, the poet seems explicitly to confirm its hypothesis: “fecundity is *one*, whether it seems spiritual or physical: for, the work of spirit too springs from the physical, is of one nature with it and only like a gentler, more ecstatic and more eternal repetition of physical delight.”¹²

Psychoanalysis is not wrong... but still, doesn’t Rilke also indicate that artistic “generation” attains another dimension than carnal reproduction? He writes that it is “more mysterious, more full of ecstasy, more ‘eternal.’” This supplement of jouissance, this approach and, perhaps, this touch of eternity (which, it seems to me, we should not understand in terms of the future, as the acquisition of a posterity, but rather of the present, the pure presence of time that, in itself, has neither past nor future), isn’t this what inevitably escapes classic psychoanalytic interpretation when it refers to the fantasy of pregnancy?

The gestation inherent to writing, without a doubt, is largely analogous to the process of maternity in a woman; and there have been numerous writers who, during the conception of their works, suffer from symptoms similar to those of certain pregnant women. Nonetheless, this analogy has its limits and it is never more than an analogy, certainly not an identity.

Rather than the similarity, it is the difference between the work of writing and the work of making a child that must occupy our attention. The artist is not the mother of his works. He is rather their son. Moreover, if biological maternity and artistic conception overlap to the extent that they become symbolically confused, then women should be specially predisposed by nature to creation. On the contrary, as we know well—even though turn-of-the-century feminism would call such a statement “politically incorrect”—truly creative women (I mean: more than talented) in the domain of the arts, whether music, painting, or literature, are extremely rare. This observation opens a question that deserves further exploration and commentary. It is a fact: there are many women musicians, but none who have become the equal of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, or Chopin. Likewise, there are many women of letters, but the fingers on two hands suffice to count those who deserve to be called great writers. The great and unforgettable thinker, Etienne Gilson, has perhaps left us the key that will make it possible at once to resolve this enigma and to measure the interpretive value of the fantasy of pregnancy. He was also sensitive to this analogy between writing and gestation: “It is possible, and even likely, that the creative fecundity of the intellect is very close to biological fecundity and that production is a particular case of reproduction. *Unless it is rather the reverse that is truly the case*” (my emphasis). This would mean that it is feminine pregnancy which is a version of artistic production and not the reverse.

The thesis is audacious. However, it does have a fervent and not insignificant partisan within the field of psychoanalysis, Lou Andréas-Salomé—a reference that is important to recall because her works have received little commentary and have not at all been exploited. In an essay entitled *Zum Typus Weib* (“The Feminine Type”), which appeared in *Imago* in 1914, the friend of Nietzsche, Rilke, and Freud, proposed that the highest form of feminine achievement consists in making the man that she engenders into a creator, that is, a being capable of entering into intimate relation with the Other. This faculty would offer the woman the possibility of raising to the level of a “cultural act” the kind of creation that “*happens* to her by her nature as a woman, without her *accomplishing* it: the child.” For Lou Andréas-Salomé, “natural” creative power is situated on the side of the woman, but its realization, as a cultural work, can only be produced in creative men. For them, she writes, “the work has become a reality in them solely because their masculine *savoir-faire* contains the feminine *savoir-faire* and that in them this double nature has become creative, creating within the *works* what the woman *is* by her *nature*.”

Without a doubt, we have here entered into another fantasy—one that the classical Freudian analyst would hasten to reduce to an expression of “*Penisneid*”—a fantasy proper to Lou Andréas-Salomé: the fantasy of being the creator of the creator, this feminine Pygmalion figure allowing the woman to conserve, in the final analysis, her control over, or, at least, the initiative of all forms of conception. One thereby understands why Lou Andréas-Salomé threw herself so successfully throughout her life into the role of muse. (Freud was perhaps the only one among

the great creators whom she knew who politely but firmly, and with great patience, declined the eminent services that she proposed to offer him).

However, the analogy between artistic conception and generation in the woman retains a certain pertinence, and the thesis of Lou Andréas Salomé deserves to be taken into serious consideration. But we should emphasize—this is decisive point in the reflection that I am trying to pursue—that what’s at stake in the analogy has less to do with *maternity* than with *femininity*. Feminine pregnancy is only a faculty of the feminine body that, far from contributing anything to the fulfillment of femininity, instead risks subtracting an essential part by throwing an opaque veil over “what the woman *is*” (in Lou Andréas-Salomé’s words). A woman who conceives becomes a mother, but does not thereby become any more of a woman. On the contrary, the psychoanalytic clinic shows us that, in a great number of cases, the woman who becomes a mother feels less of a woman than before—as if the status of mother were, in reality, a supplementary difficulty, a sort of parasitic status that opposes the achievement of femininity.

The biological reality of pregnancy in fact camouflages the woman’s subjective property of bearing the Other within herself. There is no need, to fulfill this property, to be pregnant nor to give birth. The woman *is* the Other, absolutely Other, within sexual difference, because, as Freud discovered and Lacan reformulated in more definitive terms, the unconscious is subjected to the reign to the *homosexuated*, the unisex. Indeed, in the unconscious that psychoanalysis explores, there is only one signifier that makes it possible to account for sex: the phallus. It is the phallus that the unconscious represents as present or absent, visible or hidden, erect or sliced off. In other words, the unconscious does not make it possible to formulate the existence of or the relation between two truly different sexes. This is why, refusing to follow Freud into the terrain of “feminine castration,” Lacan upheld the thesis, which was revolutionary in psychoanalysis, that femininity is *not-all*, not completely dependent upon the unconscious. She is in part (because women as well, like every speaking being, have an unconscious and are subjected to the logic of the phallus), but only in part. This *not-all*, which is characteristic of feminine subjectivity, permits another reading of what Lou Andréas-Salomé, in her will to clarify the question of creation, designates as the “double nature” specific to the creator.

A part of femininity—that which the phallic signifier fails to represent otherwise than as “castrated”—thus escapes the unconscious and language in general. Not-all, the woman is, by essence, subjected to a supplementary division in relation to the division of every subject of language. She is a divided subject; but, in addition, she is at once herself and Other to herself, identical and a stranger to herself. She, by essence, is the depository of alterity, non-identity with self, the opening onto another place, the part of being that is outside language.

Let us (provisionally) conclude this reflection upon the feminization of the writer by reading anew the words of Rilke: “We could easily be made to believe that nothing has happened, and yet we have changed, as a house changes into which a guest has entered. We cannot say who has come, perhaps we shall never know.” The hermetic saying, which upholds writing rather than speech, seems obscure because it refuses to be understood. In truth, it cannot be understood; it is not made to be understood, but simply to be taken into account. It is the saying of a language that is irremediably defective: it is only obscure because it avows the singular and unsayable share of the writer (but also of his reader), the share that has been subtracted from language. The language that bears the traces of its approach and its future can only take the path of desistance, or even of rupture with the community assembled by speech.

CIPHERING OR DECIPHERING

At the very least it would be embarrassing—and I am well placed to know something about it—if the psychoanalyst were so touched by the love of words that he let himself get carried away by the writer’s erotic relation to language. One can imagine the suffering that his profession would cause him. Psychoanalyzing implies, in the first place, offering oneself to listen for the whole day to human speech in its most ordinary, most mixed up, and most formless state, larval and infirm speech, the insane and overwhelming babbling of discourse (the reality of which President Schreber gave a stunning description for us in his delusion). The function of the psychoanalyst constrains him to collect and to burrow into unlettered speech. He is the garbage can for words pronounced in vain, ill spoken, ill thought, ill articulated; he is the drain that collects mumbling and stammering, false affirmations and spurious denegations, borrowed declarations, copied avowals, and crocodile tears. But he also sometimes a witness to authentic suffering, despair without valid response, distress that opens the abyss of an interminable *malediction*.

This somber and not very seductive portrait is certainly only a partial vision of the position of the psychoanalyst. Happily! One could offset this portrait with the wonder that comes with a lucky find, the verbal seed gleaned from the residues of the wandering discourse that is addressed to him, the illumination of the truth that comes as a surprise in tripping over a sentence, the revelation of the unavowable secret of desire glimpsed in a detour in the narrative of a dream. No matter: in comparison with the work of the writer, the terrain of psychoanalytic practice is that of a permanently defamed language. Where is the true psychoanalyst—whether or not he is the least concerned with the love for the letter—who has not experienced, at some moment in his practice, to the point of nausea, the feeling of being sullied by the regurgitated soup of language that runs into his ears?

Unless one supposes—a hypothesis upheld by certain of my fellow analysts, and that I absolutely do not exclude—that the psychoanalyst is guided by an ideal of sacrifice and takes satisfaction

in a profoundly masochist *jouissance*, one might well ask oneself what pleasure sustains the analyst in his daily visit to the hell of speech. One says that the analyst hears something else than the words that materially come out of the mouth of the analysand. This is true, but he still cannot close his ears. One also says that it is strongly recommended to the analyst, first by Freud, that he practice what is called “floating attention,” that he only listen to his analysand with a distracted ear and have confidence in his unconscious to grasp, thanks to this calculated distraction, the accidents that mark the emergence within his discourse of another speech, with another signification, another truth that can only ever half-say itself. This is also true: the analyst does *not* really *listen*; he hears, which is very different (pushing things to the extreme, hearing can even imply, on occasion, not listening).

In opposition to the role habitually filled by the confidant, the psychoanalyst does not truly take seriously what one says to him. Or, more exactly, he takes it seriously to the very extent that he does not believe in the apparent sense of the discourse that is addressed to him. The analyst *deciphers*: therein lies his pleasure and, at the same time, the mainspring of the help that he can offer the one who speaks to him. What is psychoanalytic deciphering? It is the contrary of understanding. The psychoanalyst certainly occupies the position of the listener, but he is an unexpected listener: he offers his analysand the paradoxical chance to meet with a total lack of understanding. For, experience teaches us that the unconscious truth enclosed within speech can only be heard if the one who is supposed to listen silences within himself the automatism of signification and the exigency to make sense. The condition of the psychoanalytic dialogue is a fecund misunderstanding: in seeking to listen for the combinatorics of the signifier in speech, the psychoanalyst situates his listening and his response on the level of equivocation.

Psychoanalysis thus tends to reduce the compulsion to make sense of the pure play of words. If the statement of the discourse proffered by the analysand irresistibly favors the theatricalization of the drama of speech, its enunciation, heard by the analyst, automatically takes a ludic and often frankly comic turn. This is why Lacan, in *Television* (1974), did not hesitate to qualify the virtue proper to the position of the analyst as a “gay science” (a “*gay savoir*” as Rabelais wrote it in the language of his time)—a proposition that radically separates itself from any ideal of sacrifice and the hypothesis of a masochist *jouissance*. The ideal of the psychoanalyst, the ideal of “saying well,” would be, in some way, a matter of rendering speech purely volatile by unburdening it of the weight that sense confers on it. But, like every ideal, this one is also a limit, an impossible horizon to attain: Lacan stated as much, in a laconic and tolerably discouraged fashion, in his seminar from May 17, 1977: “we remain always stuck to sense.”

The path followed by the writer is different but it is no less impossible. At the risk of aggravating the discontent inherent in my division, I would say that the writer would be horrified

at the idea of being a psychoanalyst. I console myself (no, I do not console myself) by recalling that, in one of the last teachings that Lacan addressed to us, he assailed us with the scandalous truth that the psychoanalyst himself is horrified at the idea of being a psychoanalyst!

Exposed more than the average person (even more than the psychoanalyst) to the proliferation of speech, suffering from finding in it the inexhaustible babbling that he hears everywhere outside, and wanting either to destroy or to repair the language that he cannot do without, the writer tries to assuage his suffering by entering into an operation that is the inverse of the analyst: an operation of *ciphering*. He does not seek to explain the reasons for his suffering; he mocks all explication and all forms of deciphering that do nothing but add more speech to the mill that he wants to arrest.

The writer wants to make an attempt on the life of speech, or at least of common discourse, and to oppose it with the singularity of his own cipher by giving body—an other body—to his suffering. This body, made of letters and not of spoken words, is his writing. No matter the appearances, and no matter the form and the expression of his ciphering, no matter the means and ruses he uses in its construction, this new body is first of all a mute block that he wants to impose against the noise of the world. Whether a book cries, or screams, or sings, or murmurs, and even when it seems to contain a voice that seems to speak, before it is anything else, it is always a foreign body introduced by force into speech. A sort of seawall against the tide of speech.

THE STATUE OF THE LETTER

To write is to refuse to speak and to give up being understood. To write is to raise a statue that incarnates the “not-all” in speech. It is by design that I invoke the metaphor of the statue, because, among the fine arts, sculpture is the art that manifests, in the most vehement fashion, the vow that the work should be something real, that it impose itself as a real body. Indeed, if the letter is opposed to speech, this opposition takes the form of a will to *materiality* that attempts to shatter the reign of the *semblance*.

The writer aims to provoke the apparition of Being, of a being that would be situated beyond what Lacan designates in his *Encore* seminar (February 20, 1973) as the “being of the signifying process”—a notion that leads him to a stupefying (to say the least) commentary on Democritus and Aristotle: “In fact, the atom is simply a flying element of the signifying process; it is very simply a *stoecheion*.” Without a doubt, this “being of the signifying process” does exist; in any case, the psychoanalytic experience makes it possible to uphold such a supposition. But isn’t being *merely* a consequence of the signifier? Doesn’t being result from the fact that language gives us the word “being” in order to name what escapes it? Would the atom be absent in a world in which language did not exist? I concede, we can only raise these questions because we

have language and because it permits us to make exist, in speech, the hypothesis of a world without language—and so on, to infinity...although, somewhere between us and infinity, a certain “Hubble” delivers some non-negligible data on a real that did not wait for our “being of the signifying process” to be there (I have a few reasons to believe that this data is not a matter of pure fiction). That we have captured and thereby lost this real within the network of signifiers is a fact, which signs our human condition—our condition as speaking beings—but this does not prevent the real from continuing to be.

This implacable logic of speech and language, which withdraws us from the real of being at the very moment when it gives it to us, constitutes the prison that writing seeks to break out of. The words of writing are not the words of speech; they are pieces of flesh, the flesh of language that speech does not cease excluding: against semblance, writing aims at “the Eternal.” Certain writers, such as Rilke the poet or Gilson the philosopher, equate the eternal with a manifestation of the divine. They are free to do so. But, for my part, I believe that “the Eternal” or “God” are still only signifiers (names for the “being of the signifying process”), vain signifiers that attempt to *designate* the void, the original hole where the real disappeared for us, but which they are incapable of *making present*. Nonetheless, it is the presentification, the making present of the real outside of language that the writer tries to attain.

As Etienne Gilson has written (no need to adhere to his reference to the divine in order to read the following lines): “The world in which the artist lives, when he sees it as an artist, is different from our own. Objects offer themselves to us as so many spectacles or invitations to actions that aims at utilitarian ends. The artist sees them otherwise. Everything that he perceives invites him, or can invite him, without his looking for it, to create truer beings, more beautiful, and thus also more real than those which he sees, hears, or touches. One could say that, living or not, each thing aspires confusedly to become what only his art can make of it. Not something other, but rather itself, such as it must finally be in order fully to realize its essence within the total actualization of the beauty that it harbors and that the magic eye of the artist alone has the power to divine...This is what the artist means when he defines himself as the visionary of reality.”

I invert the order of the terms that Gilson employs in order to clarify my thesis: to make the words of language more real, and thus more true and more beautiful than they are in speech—in Lacanian terms, to make the symbolic real—such is the challenge of writing (much like Morandi, in his stunning paintings, succeeds in painting the simplest objects, the most ignored by the common gaze, in such a way that they henceforth impose themselves with a presence that we never knew). The statue of the letter, or the temple of writing (another possible metaphor), try to give body to the real presence of language, at the risk of only being able to manifest the obstinate force of a silence. They are certainly precarious monuments.

For, the statue or the temple are constructed with the very material of discourse. (The letter, as Lacan recalls, is always, in the final analysis, derived from the signifier). The tide of speech always triumphs over these columns of sand, and the work must always begin again. Even better: isn't the best moment in a writer's life the moment of beginning, that delicious moment, mixed with anxiety and wonder, when the blank page still absorbs him, empties him of all thought, and invites him to plunge into its heart of silence?

THE BLANK PAGE AND ERASURE

Is there anything more beautiful, or more true, than a blank page? There is certainly not, but it must still be said, made accessible to the senses, made to exist. This is why it is necessary to write it. For, the blank page is not a simple sheet of paper; it is already, for the one who writes, a *blank page of writing*; it is already a "page for the letter"; it is already the presence of the real in waiting. The blank page is like a mute prayer, a silent oration. "Here, no birth is memorable; we are, simply put, without native language" (André du Bouchet, in *Hölderlin aujourd'hui*). The first sign, the first character traced upon this page, thus constitutes a first scratch: the first letter always scratches something out; writing begins with scratching out. And this erasure is at once a crime and a joy. It is a crime because it cuts into the unsurpassable absolute of the white page, and a joy because, committing violence against its whiteness, it nonetheless celebrates and perpetuates forever its eternal virginity.

The blank page presents itself to the writer as a rustling, a streaming of water—perhaps the same streaming that Lacan says he saw from a plane flying above Siberia (see "Lituraterre"). In this plain where nothing grows that could cast a shadow, the shimmering of the sun still produces a difference upon the whiteness of the ground, a difference similar to an effect of relief, between what shines and what does not shine (or shines less brightly). Such is the *terre* (earth, land, terrain) of the *litura*, the terrain upon which the letter comes to trace the edge that marks the rupture with semblance that defines its work. The blank page teems just as the plain of Siberian snow shimmers; for, at this preliminary stage of writing, as in Ferdinand de Saussure's famous drawing illustrating his thesis about the "arbitrariness of the sign," the passage is still continuous between the two undefined nebulas of confused ideas and sounds, between the floating clouds of signifiers and signifieds, or between the undulating waves of language and letters. It is the first scratch that will delimit these two domains, separate them, and give form to the one as much as the other.

The first scratch bears upon the filiation between the letter and the signifier. It creates writing as something distinct from speech. This fact is particularly clear in the type of writing specific

to Japanese calligraphy. Relying upon the characters (which are Chinese) that form the Japanese words, the calligraphy interprets them in a way that makes them only readable to the literate. This art is an art of scratching out the letter; and it proves that scratching out constitutes the letter as such. The key to this art comes to us from a tradition that goes back to the monk Chin-Tao (“Bitter Pumpkin”) and that aligns calligraphy with the ideal of the “unique stroke of the brush.”

The numerous scratches that follow the first—the writer’s “changes”—are not only formal corrections of word choice or syntax. Think of Proust’s or Joyce’s manuscripts and printer’s proofs: each page is a collection of scratches, to such an extent that the text sometimes becomes unreadable. Scratching out, for the writer, is always the scratching out of the speech that tends to resurface in writing: what the writer crosses out is the failure of his writing, the moment when it weakens as writing and tends to fall back into the ruts of speech.

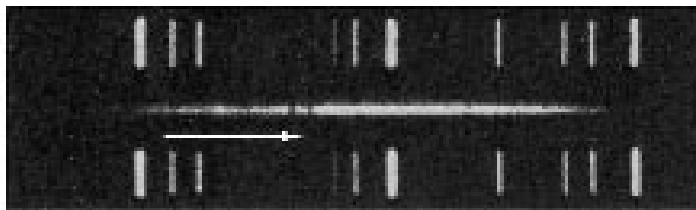
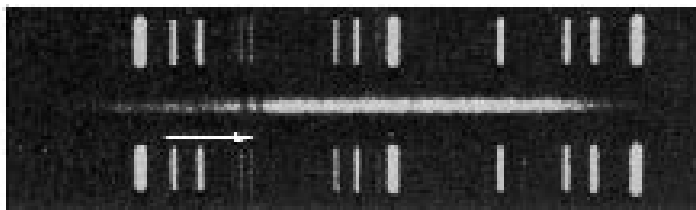
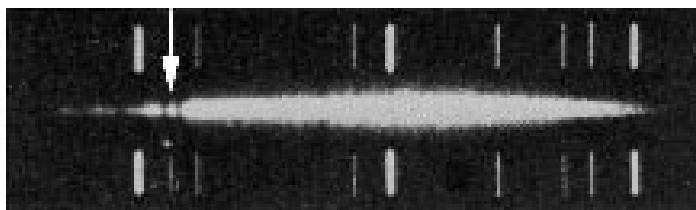
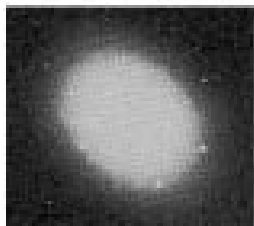
Therefore, as he covers his pages with layers of scratches, to the point of blackening them with marks down into the least open spaces, the writer does nothing other than desperately pursue, through the letter and by the letter, the primal virginity of the page in relation to speech. It is this void, this rustling void of a presence before the trace, that forms the obscure, senseless, excessive goal of writing.

One can only regret that “word processing” programs on computers today incite the writer to use them in order to make disappear, without leaving a trace of his intervention, the words and the passages that he has corrected. This innovation, which most people consider to be progress, deserves weighty reflection. This innovation inscribes itself within the general contemporary tendency to devalorize memory. “Word processing” makes it possible to suppress the writer’s scratches in a way that goes beyond revision or repression. It is censorship pure and simple, a censorship that no archive can conserve. The very function of scratching out thus falls into oblivion. That this invention has emerged during the century of the Shoah opens a frightening perspective: does the progress of civilization imply a form of barbarism whose silent and invisible violence would escape our notice? What could a page of writing be without the memory of what has been scratched out? I wonder. I wager that the material disappearance of scratching out will have repercussions upon writing itself. How so? It is too early to say and too late to fear.

For the present—and I do not think that my attitude will vary in the future—I persist in celebrating, pen in hand, the irreplaceable magic of the blank page and the sacred trembling that guides the hand that scratches out. What is the beauty of literature? It is a saying, a form that shatters our infinite interior babbling and the organic jabbering of common discourse.

At least for an instant, a saying makes the noise stop and bears the annunciation, which seems foreign to the language that joins us, of a language that has become Other to itself. It is a saying that imposes itself as an apparition that surges up from nothingness and returns to nothingness, that suddenly makes palpable the silence from which it comes, the silence that it bears like the Torah bears the name of the god of Moses, opening within us readers the future of a virgin page upon which nothing else can be inscribed. *Incipit vita nova.*

Translated by Steven Miller



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1. Jacques Lacan, *Autres écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 2001), 19.
2. Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre XXIII: Le sinthome*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 2005), 146.
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5. George Steiner, *No Passion Spent: Essays 1978-1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 8.

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7. *Ibid.*, 123.
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