

Lacan as reader

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“You prove to me that you have read my *Ecrits* which can apparently not be considered necessary for obtaining an understanding of me.” (Lacan).

1. Introduction

The publication of the *Ecrits* has posed a challenge to reading: why and how to read Lacan? Reading Lacan means to read a discourse by which the question is posed of the true relation between psychoanalysis and the theoretical order in general. This discourse calls us into the complexity of the psychoanalytic issues involved that cannot here be addressed; it also bears upon the methodological issue of the psychoanalytic treatment of literary material which is primarily reserved for the informed. The question that remains is: can our reading of Lacan’s reading teach us anything about reading in general? With these remarks and questions in mind, and without any certainty that the outcome of his reading, as expressed in *The Seminar on the Purloined Letter*, will be understood by our reading thereof, we will nevertheless proceed with our effort towards an understanding of Lacanian reading.

Before we can attend to Lacanian reading it would be appropriate to distinguish between different forms of reading.

2. Specific forms of reading

Texts can be read in different ways, and there are consequently specific forms of reading.

2.1 Reading in search of truth

One form of reading is reading with an eye on truth. In this case, both reading and writing presuppose truth. The question is: is that which is written true, or, does it reveal truth? Phenomenological reading is an example. The fact that interpersonal procedures govern the reading act has not specifically been attended to.

2.2 Reading in search of meaning

The history of reading has accustomed us to the assumption that reading comprises the finding of meaning. Hermeneutic reading is exemplary as reading with a view to meaning and significance, eventually the hidden meaning or significance of a text. The point of departure is a given text while

there is a search for the conscious or unconscious, explicit or implicit intentions of the author, i.e. the subject, as origin, as well as the real message in or behind the text. Later on, with Gadamer, a new emphasis is laid on the effects of a text outside the intentions of the author. The text is working; the important issue is what a text can bring about. This brings us into the vicinity of rhetoric.

2.3 Reading as rhetoric

Rhetoric concerns itself with the composition of production, i.e. the structure, of a text as well as with what a text can bring about and accomplish. This means that textuality or the materiality of the text is at stake. Attention is given to the factual and the possible, the direct and the indirect, designed and undesigned effects of a text. It is not a question of the truth or meaning of a text but how and by what means a text comes into existence. The origin of the text is not in the creating subject as its source; the author is much rather an effect or the product of the act of writing.

In rhetorical reading we read with an eye on the argumentative structure of the text, its persuasive power: power and authority, desire and truth. Along with this one must consider its place among other texts. All these cross references are a part of the structure of argumentation and persuasion. Oppositions and relations between the words in an argumentative framework stand in a direct relationship to meaning. Words always refer to one another and it is from this framework of references that such words borrow their meaning.

Meaning is always a matter of oppositions and relations between words in an argumentative framework. They are the bearers of the meaning of the text; they support the text and make it possible. In the rhetorical form of reading the actual functioning of these structures is important within the text, in so far as they are determinant for the structure and the meaning or the emergence and understanding of the text. Such reading views interpretative strategies as historical sets of topics, arguments, tropes, ideologies, etc. that determine how texts are established as meaningful through rhetorical exchanges.

3. Lacan's reading

Philosophers generally believe that a text contains some truth and/or meaning that can be uncovered by the method of interpretation. It is difficult for them to accept the Lacanian view that the text does not contain a fixed meaning, but takes on meaning only to conceal a deeper gap: behind the text is an unconscious system of repressed meaning whose roots lie in Desire.

In order to elaborate on this, Lacan rejects the science of interpretation with its belief in a meaning that must be brought to light. According to him we will not easily solve literary mysteries by the *methodologies concocted in conscious life*. *Narcissism and Desire subjectivize any theory, there is no transparency in meaning discernible by method and no linearity natural to logic.*

At the same time, by showing the presence of the unconscious in the world of subject/object relations, he reveals the inadequacy of phenomenological concepts in their exclusion of Desire. Since the *true subject* of perception is itself an object of unconscious myths, fictions and desires, it cannot be assessed in terms of qualities of sincerity or falsity. Lacanian reading inevitably throws uncertainty into the arena of the understanding of texts.

The impossibility at which phenomenology aims is a hypothetical unity in meaning between the perceived world and the conscious perceiving subject. Instead of the unified, conscious subject, an authority who “knows”, Lacan gives us the split subject (the supposedly knowing subject). Lacan’s conscious subject thinks it knows, but is wrong about who it is, and about what *knowledge* is. Any statement of authority has no other guarantee than that of its own utterance (Lacan, 1966: 813).

Certainty and finality are not only suspended by the nature and characteristics of the desiring subject but also by the nature of *language*. If we consider ourselves to be masters of language, we condemn ourselves, according to Lacan, to enclosure within its prison walls.

While philosophy traditionally goes in the direction of *systems*, Lacan talks about the structures that lie behind the drive to formulate and develop systems. Meaning, belief, ideology and system are only elaborations of language and identity made up of myths, historical realities and clichés. All meaning-systems are efforts to give a sense of unity to a structurally divided subject (Lacan, 1970: 136).

From the above it becomes clear that an altogether different reading strategy is required for disengaging the sense of a text. Lacan’s reading of *The Purloined Letter* is an illustration of this difference in strategy. In exploring this strategy it should be approached from various perspectives. Attention should be given to the complexity of the psychoanalytic issues involved in Lacan’s reading. In the very first paragraph reference is made to “repetition automatism”, the “unconscious”, and “the human organism . . . captured in a *symbolic dimension*” (1972: 39). Another perspective that needs to be explored is the theoretical and rhetorical themes of “the Seminar” in terms of which a certain meaning is inferred. Insights from these two perspectives will, one hopes, enable us to draw some methodological conclusions for a general theory of reading, emphasizing certain interpretative procedures and methods in terms of Lacan’s psychoanalytic treatment of a literary text. What is hoped for is the possible determination of the extent to which Lacan indeed discloses a new approach to the reading of texts.

Lacan’s reading activity (as his effort to disengage sense from a text) must be understood in terms of his theory of meaning, of the subject and of language. In the unfolding of this reading strategy he is extremely complex, but deliberately so. He writes: “Writing is distinguished by prevalence of the *text* in the sense that this factor of discourse will assume in this essay a factor that makes possible the kind of tightening up that I like in order to leave the reader no other way out than the way in, which I prefer to be difficult” (1977: 146). This planned difficulty of Lacan’s style clearly reminds us that language

is not to be reduced to some intelligible structure of meaning and theory to a rationalist commitment to 'clear and distinct' ideas.

Albeit true that in conscious life we achieve some sense of ourselves as reasonably unified, coherent beings, Lacan's complex style is meant to suggest that *attempts to convey a whole, unblemished meaning in speech and writing or to recover such meaning through reading is an illusion*. No literal, proper meaning could be disengaged from texts in order to eliminate all textual questions and ambiguities. Since Lacan's terms do not have fixed meanings it will be an illusion to think that a signifier represents a fixed signified. Meaning varies according to the context and this makes reading into a complicated exercise.

At the same time his difficulty is not meant to form an obstacle against understanding a text. It is much rather meant as *a warning against the threat of misunderstanding or distorting the text*. His warning against understanding subverts the certainties of the subject, represents the real art of psychoanalysis and is in truth a warning against premature and incomplete understanding (1966: 251 and 471). The initial indeterminacy of his texts forces the reader to search for multivocal meaning in the text. The complexity of the text is meant to liberate the reader from any specific final system or fixed frame of reference.

The dangers, moreover, of total misunderstanding or even partial understanding are very real. According to Lacan Freud was very often altogether misunderstood in his lifetime. This massive lack of understanding was hidden behind a mask of understanding. His return to Freud implies nothing but the return of the repressed i.e. the return of Freud, as it has been articulated in the Freudian thing (cf. Lacan, 1966: 401–437). This emphasizes the real need in the current cultural situation to write and to read with an alertness against all dogmatic and rigid interpretations.

The difficulty in Lacan's text *renders impossible the assumption that a constituted knowledge and a fixed meaning is invested in texts* and that the only thing needed is a straightforward disengaging of sense. Lacan's theory of reading reflects the analytic experience, and a reading that takes this into account offers a form of interpretation that cannot be separated from the theoretical insights of Lacanian psychoanalysis regarding the subject, language and meaning. Lacan wants to compel the reader to read like the analyst himself is reading.

How does this happen? As can be expected . . . in terms of his understanding of the human subject.

4. Lacan's conception of the human subject

Without doubt Lacan's reading of *The Purloined Letter* can be considered as a reading in terms of a certain conception of the human subject that he wants to demonstrate and develop. It is a most pertinent move away from the usual understanding of the subject, but a move that can only take place in terms of a specific reading strategy. Characteristic of his focus on the subject is the

importance of bringing subject, desire, language and knowledge into play (Lacan, 1966: 9–10). Some of the central aspects of his views on the human subject will be dealt with in this paragraph. The next paragraph will attend to the different aspects of his reading strategy on the basis of which support for these views can be detected and disclosed.

According to Lacan an individual is not born human but only becomes so through incorporation into a social and cultural order. Specifically human subjectivity comes into being through subjection to the Symbolic Order, the order of 'Otherness', in which we can distinguish ourselves from others and refer to ourselves as "I". Access to the Symbolic Order proceeds by way of the "mirror stage", in which the child assumes itself to be the "other" it sees reflected, and models itself upon its image. To this state of being Lacan refers as the "Imaginary". No clear distinction between subject and object, itself and the external world, is yet possible. In this condition we lack any defined centre of self. The child initially experiencing itself as a disintegrated whole, a disintegration that becomes unified only in the mirror stage. The child derives its identity not from itself but from the difference of an image. The child derives itself from *the other* than itself.

If we imagine a small child contemplating itself in a mirror we can see how, from within this imaginary state of being, the child's first development of an ego, of an integrated self-image, begins to happen. Although its relation to this image is still of an 'imaginary' kind, it has begun the process of constructing a centre of self and becomes able to imagine itself as a coherent and self-governing entity. Such an image is available to the child when he/she sees his/her own reflection in the mirror. the mirror image is not the reflection of a pre-given unity but it is the identification with this image that constitutes the unity of the child. In this regard Lacan writes that this assumption of a specular image by the child would seem to exhibit the symbolic matrix in which the "I" is precipitated in a primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, a dialectic which rests on his famous L-schema (1966: 53), and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as a subject. Lacan sketches his program in the last analysis as an effort to determine "how a formal language determines the subject" (1966: 42). The image which the small child sees in the mirror is, however, still an alienated one: the unity that develops is a split unity; the child "misrecognizes" itself in it, finds in the image a pleasing unity which it does not actually experience in its own body. The child can never fully coincide with the image by which it derives its unity.

The imaginary for Lacan is precisely this realm of images in which we make identifications, but in the very act of doing so are led to misperceive and misrecognize ourselves. This misrecognition (*la méconnaissance*) forms the fundamental structure of the mirror image. The ego is just this narcissistic process whereby we bolster up a fictive sense of unitary selfhood by finding something in the world with which we can identify. The child considers the mirror stage as an adequate representation of itself. There is still no room for *the Other*. This moment of self-identification is crucial because it represents a permanent tendency of the individual which leads him throughout life to seek

and foster the imaginary wholeness of an 'ideal ego'. The unity invented, and the ego as product of successive inventions, are attempts to find ways round certain inescapable factors of lack (*manque*), absence and incompleteness in human living. The inevitable implication is the denial by the subject of its essential split character.

In discussing the imaginary phase, there are really no more than two terms: the child itself and the other body, usually the mother, which represents external reality for the child. The "I" is the effect of this process of identification; it is no original but constituted entity. The subject is not its own cause but is caused by the Other and is for this reason separated from itself in an essential way (Lacan, 1966: 840). This fundamental split is referred to as "*le Fente*" or "*le Fading*" (Ibid: 842) and is confirmed by the child's entrance into the symbolic order of language and culture. The 'dyadic' structure is destined to give way to a 'triadic' one, and this happens when the father enters upon and disrupts this harmonious scene. The father signifies the Law, the symbolic law of culture, which is in the first place the *social taboo* on incest: the child is disturbed in its relation with its mother, and must begin to recognize in the figure of the father that the wider *familia and social network* exists of which it is only part. The symbolic order opens a world of meanings, giving the child a name whereby it can situate itself with respect to its father and mother. Its identity, or place in culture is inevitably allotted by "the Law of the Father". The appearance of the father divides the child from the mother's body and drives its desire underground into the *unconscious*. The presence of the father withdraws the child from the natural omnipotence of the mother. As long as the child is everything to the mother the desire of the Other (the mother) coincides with the desire for the child and no lack ("*le manque*") is experienced by the child. As soon as the desire of the mother can no longer fully be met by the child the immediate bond between mother and child is lost and desire is constituted.

The first appearance of the Law, and the opening up of unconscious desire, occur at the same moment: it is only when the child acknowledges the taboo or prohibition which the father symbolizes that it represses its guilty desire, and that desire is what is called the *unconscious*. But the unconscious is available *only in mediated form*. It is governed by the law of the signifier. The symbolic law of culture and language operates as mediator in every relation to the Other. Language opens a space where the "I" and the "Other" can meet.

The entry of the father signifies the sexual difference, and one of the key-terms in Lacan's work, the phallus, denotes this signification of sexual distinction. It is only by accepting the necessity of sexual difference that the child can become properly socialized. Lacan's originality is to rewrite this process in terms of *language*. Language creates the unconscious. As he acquires speech the human subject is inserting himself into a pre-existing symbolic order and thereby submitting his desire to the systemic pressures of that order: in adopting language he allows his free instinctual energies to be operated upon and organized. From now on the child has to comply with the universal laws of language. In order to become present to itself it needs the mediation of the externality of language. The child is absorbed in a network

of narratives consisting of desires and expectations, obligations and value judgements it has to obey.

Lacan's comparison of language and the unconscious as entire systems, and his account of their many possible reciprocities, are supported by detailed work on the elementary structural components of each. Without the solid structure of language the unconscious remains unintelligible. He draws upon Saussure's definition of the linguistic sign, viz signifier (*signifiant*) and signified (*signifié*) in arbitrary association, as well as on the metaphoric and metonymic poles of verbal organization proposed by Jakobson.

The way in which this happens is clearly described by Eagleton (1985: 166). We can think of the small child contemplating itself before the mirror as a kind of "signifier" and of the image it sees as a kind of "signified". Here signifier and signified are still harmoniously united as they are in Saussure's sign where the parallel between the two is emphasized. The mirror-situation could be read as a kind of metaphor: one item (the child) discovers a likeness of itself in another (the reflection). This is an appropriate image of the imaginary as a whole: where objects ceaselessly reflect themselves in each other in a sealed circuit, and no real differences or divisions are yet apparent. It is a world of plenitude, with no lacks or exclusions of any kind. Standing before the mirror, the 'signifier' finds a fullness, and unblemished identity, in the signified of its reflection. No gap has yet opened up between signifier and signified, subject and world. The infant is so far happily untroubled by the fact that language and reality are not so smoothly synchronized as this situation would suggest.

Lacan, however, questions the state of symmetry between signifier and signified. He uses the formulation S/s (signifier) (signified) and emphasizes the central problem of the status of the signified. The bar separating the two symbols is itself more than a symbol: it refers to and emphasizes the drastic cleavage between the signifier and the signified. The placing beneath of the signified is highly significant. It "slips beneath" the signifier and resists all efforts to locate or delimit it. The supremacy of the signifier is made visible before us. The quest for the signified is frivolous; the proper object of attention is the relation between signifiers, the signifying chain itself which provides a guide to the structure of the human subject. The signifier is no longer the carrier of meaning; but the differentiation of meaning without any signified or significance. The constitutive function of the signifier is hereby established.

With the entry of the father the child has to grasp Saussure's point that *identities* come about only as a result of *difference*, namely that one term or subject is what it is only by excluding another. Its identity as a subject is constituted by its relations of difference and similarity to the other subjects around it. In accepting all of this, the child moves from the imaginary register into what Lacan calls the "symbolic order", the domain of the signifier, in which the perpetual restructuring of the subject takes place: the pre-given structure of social and sexual roles and relations which make up the family and society. As soon as the symbolic order, embracing both the unconscious and language, is envisaged, the questions of logical or chronological priority

between the two begin to dissolve. These intersubjective relationships form the structural situation in which repetition as “repetition compulsion” occurs and by which it is constituted as well. Evidently the constitutive function of the signifier and the repetition compulsion are central to Lacan’s reading of *The Purloined Letter* (1972: 39).

The subject who emerges from this process is, as it has been indicated, a ‘split’ subject (*sujet réfente*), radically divided between the conscious life of the ego and the unconscious, or *repressed desire* (Lacan, 1966: 10, 54–55). It is this primary *repression* of desire which makes us what we are. The child must now resign itself to the fact that it can never have any direct access to reality. It has been banished from this ‘full’ imaginary possession into the “empty” world of language. Language is ‘empty’ because it is just an endless process of difference and absence: instead of being able to possess anything in its fullness, the child will now simply move from one signifier to another along a potentially infinite linguistic or signifying chain. One signifier implies another, and that another, and so on, *ad infinitum*: the ‘metaphorical’ world of the mirror has yielded ground to the “metonymic” world of language. Along this metonymic chain of signifiers, meanings or signifieds will be produced; but no object or person can ever be fully ‘present’ in this chain, because its effect is to divide and differentiate all identities (Eagleton, 1985: 167).

Here we encounter a further excursion into linguistics. Jakobson’s two poles of verbal organization provide for Lacan the clue to two modes of connection within the signifying chain. The two poles, metaphoric and metonymic, coexist competitively within any symbolic process. For Lacan condensation corresponds to metaphor and displacement to metonymy. The physical mechanism by which neurotic symptoms are produced involves the pairing of two signifiers – unconscious sexual trauma and changes within, or actions by the body – and is thus metaphorical; unconscious desire, indestructible and insatiable as it is, involves a constant displacement of energy from object to object and is thus metonymic.

This potentially endless movement of signifiers is what Lacan means by desire. All desire springs from a lack-of-being, which it strives continually to fill. Eagleton writes: “Human language works by such lack: the absence of the real objects which signs designate, the fact that words have meaning only by virtue of the absence and exclusion of others. To enter language, then, is to become a prey to desire” (1985: 167). Or, as Lacan remarks, the moment in which the child is born into language is also the moment at which desire becomes human (1977: 103). We will now never be able to find rest in any single object, any final meaning, in terms of which sense of all the others can be discovered. To enter language is to be severed from what Lacan calls “the real”, that which is there, already there, but an inaccessible realm which is always beyond the reach of signification, always outside the symbolic order. In particular we are severed from the mother’s body; we will never again be able to attain this precious object, even though we will spend all of our lives hunting for it. We have to remain satisfied with substitute objects, what Lacan calls “the object little a”, with which we try vainly to provide for the lack at the centre of our being. There is no transcendental meaning or object

which will ground this endless yearning – or if there is such a transcendental reality, it is the phallus itself, the “transcendental signifier” as Lacan calls it. But this is not in fact an object or reality, nor the actual male sex organ. It is merely an empty marker of difference, a sign of what divides us from the imaginary and inserts us into our predestined place within the Symbolic Order.

Lacan regards the unconscious as structured like a language. This is not only because it works by metaphor and metonymy. It is also because it is composed less of signs as stable meanings than of signifiers. This means that the unconscious is governed by the same rules as all other systems: the rules which Lacan has expressed as the law of the signifier. If one dreams of a horse, it is not immediately obvious what this signifies: it may have many contradictory meanings. The image of the horse is not a sign in Saussure’s sense (i.e. it does not have one determined signified) but is a signifier which may be attached to many different signifieds, and which may itself bear the traces of the other signifiers which surround it (Example derived from Eagleton, 1985). The unconscious is available only in a linguistically mediated form. As such it is a continual movement and activity of signifiers, whose signifieds are often inaccessible to us because they are *repressed*. This is why Lacan speaks of the unconscious as a “sliding of the signified beneath the signifier”, as a constant fading and evaporation of meaning, a text which is almost unreadable and which will certainly never yield up its final secrets to interpretation. “The signifier is a unit in its very uniqueness, being by nature symbol only of an absence” (1972: 54).

If this constant sliding and linking of meaning were true of conscious life, then we would never be able to speak coherently at all. If the whole of language were present to me when I spoke, then I would not be able to articulate anything at all. For this reason, according to Lacan, all our discourse is in a sense a slip of the tongue: as ambiguous as he suggests, we can never mean precisely what we say and never say precisely what we mean. Meaning is always in some sense an approximation, a near-miss a part-failure, mixing non-sense and non-communication into sense and dialogue. We can certainly never articulate truth in some ‘pure’ unmediated way. Moreover truth reveals from time to time its fictive arrangement (1972: 46).

The role assigned by Lacan to the signifier is accompanied by another redefinition of the terms ‘subject’ (*sujet*) and ‘ego’ (*moi*). The ego is the reified product of successive imaginary identifications and embraced as the seat of personal “identity”. This stabilized ego plays dumbly into the hands of social engineers and soul managers. The subject on the other hand is not a stable thing; it is characterized by difference and displacement and can be grasped only as a set of tensions, mutations, and dialectical upheavals within a continuous, intentional, future-directed process. The mobile course of the subject is founded in the actuality which contains in its presence the future anterior (1966: 50). The basis for this mobility is supplied by the signifying chain itself. The domain of the signifier, in which the perpetual restructuring of the subject takes place, is called the symbolic order.

When, in conscious life, we achieve some sense of ourselves as reasonably

unified coherent selves, without which action would be impossible, all this happens merely at the 'imaginary' level of the ego. The ego is a function or effect of a subject which is always dispersed, never identical with itself, strung out along the chain of the discourses which constitute it and therefore no longer a certain reference point. There is a radical split between these two levels of being. Although they are distinct and opposed, the symbolic encroaches upon the imaginary, organizing and directing it; the signifying chain exposes the false fixities of the Imaginary and coerces it into movement.

This account of the subject as dispersed, decentred and dialectical is itself reworked and protected from the danger of promoting an array of fixed concepts. The terms he uses in depicting the discontinuous itineraries of the subject, viz division, split, fading, etc. are kept active by the important term: "The Other". The subject is made and remade in his constant encounter with this "Other". The principle for Lacan is that it is in language that our message comes to us from the Other (1966: 11). What the subject seeks in speech is the response of the Other; even the message he emits is received from the Other; man's desire finds its meaning in the desire of the Other which characterizes the relationship between subject and Other (1966: 814). But the Other is not only a term in the dialectical couple "Subject-Other"; it constitutes simultaneously the entire locus of "otherness" (*altérité*) which embraces both subject and Other. It is also used to relate the interpersonal and intrapersonal worlds: "the unconscious is the discourse of the Other" (Lacan, 1966: 814).

Why is this 'Other' written with a capital letter? How can it remain useful when it may be variously defined as a father, a place, a point, a dialectical partner, a horizon within or beyond the subject, the unconscious, language etc? Clearly it is not a matter of irresponsibility on the part of Lacan if his thought is considered as a whole and comprehensive system of mutually implying parts. The original Other, the name-of-the-father, introduces a gap between desire and its object(s) which the subject is bounded by, and bound to, throughout his life and at all levels of his experience. This primordial alienation, this first otherness, is destined to recur and be converted; it is the origin of language and the subject alike, and provides an essential precondition for the humanness of man.

5. Lacan's reading of *The Purloined Letter*

Over against the traditional understanding of reading as the pursuit of truth and the search for meaning by a self-conscious human subject Lacan offers a reading by which he demonstrates the fictive character of truth and the losses of the plenitude of meaning and the security of self-possession.

In the traditional model, the reading activity corresponds with the interpretation of identity, the analysis of some substantial contents, the consideration of the author's biography, the application or applicability of the reader's theoretical presuppositions, the isolation of the grammatical features of the text, the discernment of a specific continuity of development, the determination of the truthfulness of the text, the identification of the self-assertive role of subjects, and the manipulation of textual meaning.

Lacan's reading is drastically subversive of this traditional model and finds explicit demonstration in his reading of *The Purloined Letter*. In this subversive reading strategy he emphasizes the fundamental importance of difference, the predominant position of the floating signifier, the far-reaching implications of formalized textuality, the interimplication of theoretical presuppositions, the innovativeness of a theoretical strategy, the discontinuity in conscious understanding, the role of fictivity and the mythical with regard to truth, intersubjective complexity, and the plurality of meanings.

The Purloined Letter constitutes a cardinal text with which Lacan prefers to open his collection of essays published as *Ecrits*. He uses the story to illustrate his theoretical insight that "it is the symbolic order which is constitutive for the subject – by demonstrating in a story the decisive orientation which the subject receives from the itinerary of a signifier" (1972: 40). His reading of the text is a reading in terms of this revised conception of the subject under the impact of the psychoanalytic insights of Freud and the structural views of language. What is important is the way in which the encounter between the insights of psychoanalysis and the views of structural linguistics brings to the fore a new and different understanding of the human subject. Since it is already clear from his 'Ouverture' to the *Ecrits* that in this subject desire, truth, language and knowledge is knotted together, it can be expected that his reading strategy will imply an intense effort of unravelling (*dénouement*). The extent to which this effort will be successful may become clear from the discussion of the major issues emphasized in his reading strategy. What should constantly be kept in mind, however, is that Lacan's psychoanalytic theories have immense general theoretical implications. His reading of *The Purloined Letter* has some relevant consequences for every individual reader irrespective of his or her theoretical disposition. The suggestion is that Lacan's reading strategy can within certain limits be generalized in order to become a reading strategy for whoever wants to read.

First of all we have to note the importance of the place of the letter (1972: 52–54). Central motives are the letter and the real. On the one hand the letter had shown us that it produces all the effects of truth in man (Lacan, 1966: 509); on the other hand the letter has never had any real existence. It is by definition a lost object of satisfaction, the unattainable goal of desire, and therefore an abstraction. As a linguistic element the latter also possesses this quality of abstraction: it is the mark for an absent object, defined by **differential significance**. It is both there in the erogenous zone, as a trace, and distinct from it, detachable from the body on which it is inscribed. It is this abstract quality that allows it to persist. This expresses the elusive aspect of the inscription and permits the repetition in which pleasure or displeasure is experienced. But what is repeated? Precisely the difference and not sameness or identity, the symbolic displacement of the letter (a signifier) through the insistence of a signifying chain, and not the contents of the same unconscious fantasies. The significance of the letter as signifier is not in its contents which remains unknown but in its displacement, i.e. in its repetitive movements toward a different place (Felman, 1980: 139). A text has authority to be a text precisely insofar as it marks these different positions and their shifts. The

implication is, of course, that we have a nonmanifest text, a text that has no positive terms, a textual unconscious, in which positions exist in a decentered system by virtue of differing from each other. As a matter of fact the unconscious is a particular effect of language, a process of desire set in motion by this difference. The extent in which difference (and not identity and sameness) is fundamental in repetition is reflected in the following remark: "The subjects relay each other in their displacement during the intersubjective repetition and their displacement is determined by the place which a pure signifier . . . comes to occupy (Lacan, 1972: 45).

Lacan does not try to uncover any hidden referential content of the letter which is believed to be hidden somewhere in some real biographical depth (the signified). He sees his task rather in the analysis of the invisible symbolic evidence of the **displacement** of the letter in a signifying chain (the signifier). He finds his support for this in the following: "the tale leaves us in virtually total ignorance of the sender, no less than of the contents of the letter" (1972: 57). Yes, we know nothing of the message it conveys. The symbolic evidence guides his analysis of the unconscious or the repressed (the forgotten, the unknown (1972: 63) (like the letter)), as that which is at the same time exposed (also like the letter), through a significant rhetorical displacement.

The focus on the signifier is a reversal of the traditional expectations to search for and discover hidden but fixed meanings. It opens up a new assumption: what can be read is not just meaning, but the lack of meaning; and significance lies not just in consciousness but in its disruption; . . . what is analytical is not . . . the *readable*, but the *unreadable*, and the *effects* of the unreadable . . . the *insistence* of the unreadable in the text." (Felman, 1980: 141). Lacan leaves us in no darkness about the decisive nature of the itinerary of the signifier (1972: 40); its priority in relation to the signified (1972: 59); the fact that everything . . . will follow the path of the signifier (1972: 60) and that the unconscious means that man is inhabited by the signifier (1972: 66).

This emphasis on the signifier presupposes a theory of **textuality** and leads to a certain textual analysis for which the biographical particulars of the author are irrelevant. Lacan's primary contribution to psychoanalysis – and, by extension, to narrative theory – has been to elaborate this notion of the text: "an economy of conscious and unconscious systems in various stages of disunity – a text/system governed by metaphor" (Davis, 1983: 989).

For Lacan "the unconscious is not only that which must be read but also and primarily that which reads" (Felman, 1977: 118). His return to Freud is one that demands a focus on textuality as the production of desire. And desire is captured in an accurate way in relation to the paradoxical situation of reading articulated by Davis as follows: "we turn to and read a text as if, by giving attention to it, we look into it and master or possess it *as an object*. But while reading, in fact, we are focused upon and held by a Gaze that come through the agency of the object text. Thus held in the act of reading . . . we are not masterful subjects; we – as readers – then become the object of the Gaze" (1983: 988). Any failure to distinguish clearly between the poetic in a text and the symptomatic of the author rests on a failure to take serious the textuality of the text. At the same time, any clear-cut opposition between the

textual and the biographical, the poetic and the symptomatic, health and madness, is unsettled by the functioning of the Purloined Letter as a letter of the unconscious, which no one can possess or master. Or, as Lacan himself puts it: "Our fable is so constructed as to show that it is the letter and its diversion which governs the entries and roles of the subjects . . . Falling in possession of the letter – admirable ambiguity of language – its meaning possesses them (1972: 60). There is, in other words, no way in which interpretation can itself escape the effects of the unconscious: no interpreter or reader is immune to unconscious delusions and errors.

It is obvious from the discussion up till now that the point at issue is not the simple application of a psychoanalytic reading method to a literary text. Ragland-Sullivan suggests that a close reading of Lacan implies "that literature operates a magnetic pull on the reader because it is an allegory of the psyche's fundamental structure" (1984: 381). It is therefore more a matter of the reader or interpreter finding himself inside instead of outside the text. Application, since it emphasizes exteriority with respect to its object of application, is therefore not a suitable term for describing a reading relation of interiority. It is rather a matter of **the mutual implication** of psychoanalytic reading and the literary text. We have already seen it: the letter governs the *entries and roles* of subjects, and the letter is the symbol of a pact (Lacan, 1972: 58). The implications of a psychoanalytic reading strategy, since it is not given beforehand, are diverse and promising – a challenge to the ingenuity of the reader.

It has already been emphasized that this working of the text, and, of course, of textual elements, must be related to **rhetoric** and that rhetorical reading is a reading with an eye on **the persuasive power of the text**. A fundamental myth of Western culture, of the University, of philosophic discourse is the assumption of "subjects who supposedly possess knowledge". By subverting this subject psychoanalysis radicalises a theory of non-transparency, a theory of what Gaston Bachelard used to call "universal misunderstanding" and Marcel Proust "this perpetual error that we precisely call life". The question, therefore, is: how to make this theory of mistake essential to the subject of theory? How does one, in view of the theory of error, escape from error? In terms of what kind of understanding can a theory of misunderstanding be called radical? Lacan's strength and originality reside in his efforts to cope with this untenable theoretical position. Mistake is for Lacan "the illusion of the unconscious" which, in language "becomes known as the rhetorical surcharge", and for which Freud indicates the argument: the symptom functions as metaphor, desire as metonymy, and the narcissistic defense mechanisms utilize all kinds of 'tropes' and 'figures of style'. A theory of error or mistake will therefore be a theory of the rhetoric of the unconscious. Lacan writes: "It is on the basis of the manifestation of the unconscious, with which I am occupied as analyst, that I came to develop a theory of the effects of the signifier and that leads to the rediscovery of rhetoric" (Lacan, 1977: 123). Whatever is meant by rhetoric its importance for Lacanian reading would lie in the question posed by its existence: does it refer to any meaning beyond grammar and, if so, to what meaning? Grammar as the desire to establish a

name, a rule of rigid correctness, and as an effort therefore to escape from the mistake, proves to be an impossible desire. It cannot provide explanation for the mysteries of literary texts, nor does it offer solutions to the conflict of interpretations and the diversity of textual devices burdened by the effects and desires of subjects. Rhetorical devices deliberately alter word order, thus subverting conventional relations between word and object. While grammatical language takes on meaning when elements are opposed to each other, rhetoric spreads grammar out into a variety of verbal defenses against direct knowledge.

There is always this incongruity between the grammatical model of the continuous and the rhetorical model of the **discontinuous**. Both ordinary and literary discourses are punctuated by discontinuities, contradictions and enigmas. The discontinuity, (i.e. the lack of meaning), in conscious understanding, can and should be interpreted as such, without necessarily being transformed into meaning. A main issue here is the function of repression in the text. The retrieval of repression is central to Lacan's reading, challenges the fixity of reading as interpretation, and it is brought about by important 'gaps' in the text or discourse as well as by a certain discontinuity.

Obviously the procedures that govern reading go beyond grammar especially because it is of an interpersonal nature. The Lacanian subject, divided as it is between being and speaking, cannot be absolutized in its ability to read into an ideal reader. Since these aspects of the human subject are contradictory among themselves the ego and consciousness can no longer be considered as transparent functions. This split or division is exemplary of the contradictory level on which humans perceive and consequently read. In order to clarify this problem Lacan emphasizes that the unconscious is no private region 'inside' us, but an effect of our relations with one another; it exists rather between us. It is a kind of vast network which surrounds us and weaves itself through us. The best illustration of this network is language which is never within our individual control, always pre-exists us and must be considered as a determining force. "It is not only the subject but the subjects, grasped in their intersubjectivity, who . . . model their very being on the moment of the signifying chain which traverses them" (Lacan, 1972: 60). In our effort to read properly we have to do with an **intersubjective complex**, the immixture of subjects, the plurality of subjects, articulated by the formula: "the unconscious is the discourse of the Other" (Lacan, 1972: 44–45). When the register of truth is situated at the very foundation of intersubjectivity (Lacan, 1972: 49) it illustrates the corrosive effects of the demands of an intersubjective communication situation on a naïve notion of truth and suggests rather the **pluralization of truth** and the taking on forever of new meanings.

6. Conclusion

What is of central importance then in Lacanian reading is the way meaning is made. This view of meaning production is strange to all consciousness centred approaches. According to it, meaning production is determined by other-

directed relationships, as well as by unconscious narcissistic strategies. Both the purpose of using language to translate hidden, unconscious discourse and the fact that creativity in language comes from enigmatic meaning stem from an unconscious meaning network. The implication is that the unconscious does not leave any of our actions, including the reading act, outside its domain. The reader is not an independent authoritative agent that simply responds to, accepts, rejects or criticizes a text; nor is the text a fixed thing in which meaning is invested and which simply should be read or responded to. Lacanian reading has a subversive effect on the text as object as well as on any authoritative truth discovering reading. In this way, in a more general sense, psychoanalytic reading may enable us even to understand things about science which science itself cannot reach, namely that science is born not of reason but of desire. New possibilities are thus opened up by it for the enterprise of reading, which poses a constant challenge to the ingenuity of any reader whatsoever.

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