

The political letter: A feminist reading

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This re-reading of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Purloined Letter*¹ (Poe, 1980) aims at defining the political "letter" in Poe's short story as the ideologically based textualisation of the Queen, whose silence will be shown up as a pre-condition of the telling of the story. This silence allows for a fiction to come into being, in this case in the mode of a detective story. The detective story is a discursive unit which aims at consensus with the reader about its own fictional being – the story is to be read as story. This consensus is achieved when the detective story is being read and enjoyed as such, becoming in a Barthean sense a text of pleasure. Consensus, in other words, describes the contract between text and reader which informs the telling throughout. This contract is, however, not the opposite of textualisation as desire. To put it in the terms of two major theoreticians referred to below, Habermas is not put against Lacan. On the contrary, desire, seen in Oedipal terms and following Lacan in this, is a prerequisite to that form of perfect discursive communication where the very validifications of speech as truth can be put to question – a perfect discourse, since it can objectify and relativise itself *discursively*, and, secondly, since its major felicity condition is that the partners agree to disagree and to use the bases of disagreement as guideline towards the formulation of non-ideological, liberated validifications. This, the article maintains, is the implicit agreement to disagree which a detective story activates in the communication process. The reader must agree not to understand in order to be enlightened eventually. This enlightenment will be based solely on the reading experience and depends on no outside factor. It is shaped by the story only, but then by the story as something which has to be read. A value, or an experience, is allowed for by the reading which is cut loose from the ideological validifications of truth which abound in society. For this effect to happen, two structural factors come into play: firstly, the story is a signifier in the Lacanian sense. Its meaning fulfillment depends on a reading and its structure implies this reading by the postponement of clues and other obvious characteristics of the detective quiz. The telling of the *Letter* proceeds from a position of desire, its implied authorial voice being a desiring subject. Secondly, desire voices itself as power, creating a story which sets its own conditions of felicity. Power is not a dogma or a position within a safeguarding institution – in the case of the telling of the detective story, it is the ability of the telling to lay down the terms of its own felicity conditions by creating its own reader, who agrees to these conditions in complete freedom.

In fact, the belief in this freedom of reading is *the* felicity condition of a detective story of the quizzical, intellectual and contemplative kind presented in Poe's *Letter*.

The interesting point about such a perspective seemed to be that a model of

liberal – or, rather, liberalist – communication needs ideologically automated language. This language is represented in the *Letter* by what has been termed above the queen's "silence". In the context, "silence" denotes a situation in which the woman acts exactly in accordance with the roles her social position expects from her. The social position is the legally and regally imposed loyalty, respect and deference with regard to the king and his household.

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The reading will follow Lacanian terminology and Lacan's reading of the *Letter* initially.

As is well known, Lacan reads the *Letter* as exemplary for the displacing effect of a signifier, taken for a sign, on those who place their stakes in this sign – the letter in this case. The story enacts the scenario of desire as structure, based on primal repression and the subsequent chain of displacements staged by the signifier itself and effected on the subjects. These, unwittingly, illusionary subjects, are created by the very object which they themselves create by virtue of the force of desire. The illusionary being of the subject in question is, paradoxically, both necessary for dynamic action and based on a lack (of being), a paradox formulated by Lacan with reference to the Freudian castration complex and Oedipal triangle.²

Rereading Poe through Lacan, the primarily repressed content can be redefined as the powerlessness of the queen. It is this powerlessness which gives rise to the theft by supplying its motivation for the Minister, and subsequently gives rise to the game of retrieval and restoration to ownership. This game follows the logic of power throughout, so that power becomes the code by means of which desire articulates itself in the *Letter*. So, for example, the letter constitutes the Minister's subjection to his own ambitious intentions and exposes him as that "... monstrous horrendum, an unprincipled man of genius", as Dupin remarks (Poe, op. cit.: 216). The Minister in fact seems to repeat the queen in the way in which a subconscious weakness of which he is the victim, is being exposed. Dupin, repeating in his turn the Minister's exposure of the queen's weakness, latches on to this. The matter of the queen's letter constitutes, for him, a means of revenge fulfillment: "D., at Vienna once, did me an evil turn, which I told him, quite good-humouredly, that I should remember." (ibid.) The message, returned to the subject by the other as Lacan has it, is that of desire itself which, in the case of the Minister, reveals to him the very weakness and lack of self which was obscured, temporarily, but his own phallic identification with self as power. The discovery of his own powerlessness has as its most basic truth not the personal catastrophe involved here, but the lack of self characteristic of phallic appropriations of illusionary selves constructed as an answer to the desire of the Other. At that moment imminent at the closing of the story when the Minister will face his own helplessness, he will find himself at the place of the Other and experience the extent to which the letter as signifier has structured him to become the illusionary successful schemer who he was.

For Lacan, the constitutive force of the Other is most clearly demonstrated at that point in which the phallus as sexual signifier seems to signify itself – the point at which the Minister becomes, like the queen, a receiver of *billet-doux* and at which he, like a queen, places the letter, torn in half, “. . . just beneath the middle of the mantelpiece” (ibid.: 214). At this moment, the force of the letter as signifier of desire is revealed, the Minister’s enactment of the stance of the recipient being its indication. At the same time however, this enactment is also the display of the letter by which the Minister’s scheme will be perfected. It becomes, therefore, a display of the Minister’s control and schematic insight. This insight resembles the schematic insight of Dupin in its cunning and foresight as much as it reveals the Minister’s intent on success. To be a signifier of desire in the Lacanian reading, the letter also has to be a signifier of the potential for exploitation and the threat of downfall of the queen. This double meaning, ignored by Lacan, is carried by the letter’s value as *billet-doux*. As such, it becomes the signifier of usurpation, ultimate control and invincibility of the Minister in his display.

Read within Freud’s logic of primal repression (Freud, 1960: 62–71; Laplace & Pontalis, 1972: 578–9), taken up by Lacan as the Other of irredeemable lack, one may conclude once more that power is the code of desire in the *Letter*. What is subconsciously repeated is the observed transgression, i.e. the exploitation of powerlessness and the usurpation of the place of the intended recipient and true subject of ownership. The Minister usurps a position of courtly power beyond that which was invested in him. It is symptomatic of the constitutive force of the symbolic and the imaginary that the very order transgressed is the order which is *used* to facilitate the transgressive usurpation.

For desire to function as both a structure and a structuring process (–) the functions delineated in Lacan’s diagrams as ($\$ \diamond a$), ($S (\Phi)$) and ($\$ \diamond D$) amongst others. (Lacan, 1977: 313, 315), it is necessary that a mediating ground is at hand which remains essentially constant. In the case of the Minister it is necessary that the regal *status quo* remains intact and, more specifically, *can be expected to remain intact*. The order on which the insertion of the Minister into the desiring chain depends, is, however, not the symbolic order, as the remarks above have pointed out. For the symbolic and the imaginary to meet, a specific terrain of apparently fulfilled and closed *signs* has to be available. This terrain contains those elements of meaning which are automatized – it is, in short, the terrain of ideology as meaning protective and retentive force itself. Not the Oedipal itself, but the provision of an Oedipal factor seems necessary for the phallic and illusionary fulfilment of self as power to take place in the Minister’s case. At this stage one could point out in advance that the silence of the queen is not the result of an inescapable and pre-given Oedipalistic framework, but is a sign by which an Oedipal economy can start constituting itself.

This means that Oedipus cannot function without ideological contexts. Ideology as subject position shows itself at the intersection of the imaginary and the symbolic, following Lacan, and can, therefore, be referred back to the Oedipal principle. For the Minister to become an illusionary subject of

power and autonomy in the way the story depicts and for the *imago* of self to become a force, the Minister must be made to experience himself as a complete self-reflective subject, present to himself and in control of his mind at every moment of action. The Minister accedes to this position by virtue of a scheme which he deems successful. The temporary success and eventual failure of the Minister depends, not on his identification with a particular scheme, but with the spontaneous belief that meaning can be made transparent and be dealt with abstractly, and that consequently behaviour can be predicted adequately by means of a model which unites meaning and transparency.

3

Dupin mirrors the Minister in the belief in truth as a scheme outlined above, and merely differs in the extent of intelligent interpretation and application of the principle. Like the Minister, Dupin as textual figure demonstrates to what extent Oedipus introduces the ideologising effect.

Dupin introduces and explains a code of intersubjectivity which turns out to be the master code determining the failure or success of the subjects caught up in desire. The implementation of this code is typical for the approach of the detective: "I dispute the availability, and thus the value, of that reason which is cultivated in any special form other than the abstractly logical . . . mathematical axioms are *not* axioms of general truth. What is true of relation – of form and quantity – is often grossly false in regard to morals, for example." (Poe, *op. cit.*: 211). The importance of an adequate principle of inter-subjective understanding is demonstrated in the successful retrieval of the letter. Dupin supports his argumentation with anecdotes of the marble game and chart reading, the first describing the placing of the subject with regard to the rules of the game concomitant with the placing of the subject by desire, and the second illustrating the reading of the Other through the thus positioned subject who does not see what is most obvious. As the detective *par excellence* who operates according to a mental ploy, the success of which is guaranteed by a code of rationality which allows for the reconstruction and the predictability of human behaviour, Dupin finds himself placed as subject by virtue of the very code of which he is the masterly performer. Dupin's schematic solution is as much extracted from the victim and inspired by his own hidden motivations as it is a token of clever, autonomous observation. The detective only starts practising as detective within a situation which provides the role. Dupin's mastery is derived from role playing, the role inherent to the scheme which has been defined above as one of rationality based on intersubjectivity, the winner being predictably the one who knows his opponent best. The poeticity of human behaviour can be accounted for in a scheme when this scheme is clever, inclusive and informed enough. In this sense, the master is subjected to and in his mastery defined by that which guarantees his mastery.

Dupin's mastery as detective of intelligence is completely dependent on the correctness of the formulation of a truth, i.e. it is dependent on a code. This

means that mastery can be outmastered by itself. The very principle which causes the downfall of the Minister – finding the correct code for the behaviour of the opponent and more precisely, the correct code by which he judges you, his adversary – is the principle which guarantees Dupin's success. The detective story in general, and the *Letter* in particular, then seems to inform us that mastery is not an identity but the effective deployment of a scheme. The effect, however, depends on the extent to which the performer of the scheme regards himself as an autonomous, controlling subject, believes in his mastery and believes it to be his. In the *Letter*, it is the particular achievement of the principle of rationality that the individual is elevated by the same stroke which relegates him to the intersubjective and to a mere role playing.

In as far as the scheme of both the culprit and the detective describes an implicit consensus, the *Letter* shows to what extent the rationality principle is an Oedipal one.

4

The Minister enacts most lucidly the subject of the signifier as analysed by Lacan to the extent that his identification with the *imago* shows discreet symptoms of his becoming an eclipsed subject who has no being outside the illusionary self adhered to (Lacan, 1982: 45–49). The endangered self is made visible by the display of the letter, by Lacan seen as the uncanny and paradoxical work of castration anxiety. The more endangered the Minister factually is, the more he experiences his strength as scheming politician as the other side of a potential weakness or downfall. This allows for the conclusion that the Oedipalistic double bind as formation and positioning of a subject rests, for its effect, on truth as that which can be modelled and thus manipulated. This conclusion is supported by Dupin's subject position to the extent in which it explains the position of the subject who has successfully mastered the codes and has become the master of the Oedipalistic situation. To master the codes means to move through the Oedipalistic double bind and to become, following Lacan's analysis of *Hamlet* (*ibid.*), Laertes instead of Hamlet. If Oedipalism is dependent on truth as a code, then the silence of the queen most aptly signifies this artificial truth. The term "silence" is adequate insofar as the queen is textualised only by means of a reference during the discussions, expositions and anecdotal narrations which make up the textualisation techniques of the *Letter*. More precisely, she is that of which Dupin, the Prefect and the narrator merely speak. She is a term in the discursive economy of, especially, Dupin – an economy in which she, with the other signifying units, serves the exposition of the scheme of intersubjective rationality which Dupin pursues.

The reduction of a non-contingent given to a term is the precondition for a formulation, in this case the interpretative scheme of Dupin, in which signifier and signified must *seem* to coincide. In the *Letter*, desire becomes operative to the extent in which non-contingent reality can be reduced to a scheme – a scheme of power for the Minister and a scheme of overpowering for Dupin. Oedipus – or the subject formed with respect to an underlying

castration possibility – can find himself, triumphantly or lethally endangered, only in a world or in a story in which models of truth, value, power, security or subjectivity dominate these same forces – a point explicitly made by Deleuze/Guattari (1977).

The queen signifies this modelling. She first of all signifies “woman”, but woman textualised as a queen who is dependent on the king and wishes to observe his status, regarding the latter, as befits a queen, as her own. Her submissiveness is textualised as natural; it is, in fact, elided by the very automatised of this female subordination which all other figures in the story take for granted. “Woman” is that place in the Oedipal triangulation where the “Name of the Father” constitutes itself as man – husband, amorous promise or helper – within a set regal and legal order, and where castration inscribes, not a phallic subject but an always already eclipsed subject without an *imago*. (Lacan, 1982: 42–49). The desire of such an Oedipalistic non-subject is merely a repetition of the desire of the Oedipal Other – the powerful figure-head. This position of woman has been defined “double displacement” (Spivak, 1983: 160–195; Féral, 1981: 52–64). “Double displacement” denotes a quasi-desiring structure from which the imaginary is excluded or, rather, already redefined within the symbolic. Oedipalistically defined woman must either pursue her own phallic instinct like a man, or submit to the loss of the phallus as that which defines her being, or, as Kristeva contends, explore the paradox of this choice as her own marginal position as suppressed subject whose suppression and marginality become the terms of a new form of speech and selfrealisation (Kristeva, 1974; 1977a, 1977b and 1982) Since the *Letter* is merely interested in the restoration of the letter as a demonstration of the felicity of the intersubjective rationality applied by Dupin, the queen is relayed to the position of submission to her Oedipalistically defined role, summarised as “double displacement”. This role is, however, a mere term describing a set social function within a set code which both remain intact. In the *Letter* woman is not described in terms of *what or where* she is, but she rather herself becomes a term in another’s discourse on rational intersubjectivity, which is successful because this term will predictably remain identical to itself – the queen will not rob, murder or run away with her lover.

Woman, then, signifies not herself but double displacement as that factor which allows for the smooth formulation of an orderly code which safeguards both the intersubjective premises of the courtly order *and* the discursive schematics, which depends, as already pointed out, for its success on the stability of the courtly order.

This seems the more clear when the queen’s efforts at variation (by means of a lover) and at disruption (by way of possession of the letter through energetic retrieval) of the basic Oedipal social and sexual strongholds merely lead to her finding herself more effectively situated within and constrained by the Oedipal triangle. On the level of narrated events the queen becomes the formula by which this triangle repeats itself through the actions of, first, the Minister, and then Dupin. Their subsequent usurpations of the letter disclose the co-determinacy of the powerlessness of woman and the “Name of the

Father". In the *Letter*, to be the owner of a letter simply means to represent the stable, social code which allows for desire to run its Oedipalist course. The silence or gap left by woman is made invisible by the fact that she represents such set, obvious meanings which have the conventional power of representation and which claim the unity of signifier and signified. This is a precondition for an economy of meaning which, in the *Letter*, is distinctly a male, phallic economy. It is male and phallic insofar as illusionary self-fulfillment through power or outwitting and revenge coincide with social sexual identity – only men can perform the phallic feats and follow the phallic pursuits narrated in the *Letter*. Oedipalistic psychoanalysis analyses the conflagrations of self and sexual identity and described the multiple ways in which the self finds itself always already related to the symbolic because of his sexual identity which is a symbolic identity in the first place. The male economy of meaning which traverses the *Letter* as detective story is therefore an Oedipalistic economy. As such it exposes, with respect to the woman in the story, the colonising, usurpatory and power-motivated aspects of economies of desire based on the Oedipal double bind. This double bind has been traced by Lacan through the ironic unity of desire and lack, the possession of the desired object always implying the loss of the object as such or the loss of the desiring self in lieu of the object. More concretely, this underpins the irony of the master whose mastery depends on a scheme which might be applied to him, leaving him, as Lacan observed (Lacan, 1972: 28) with his rear exposed. Intersubjective rationality demands that the performers and partakers of this verbal or mental discourse place their faith in the power and effectiveness of the discursive schematics itself, as the Habermassian proposal in respect of the perfect democratic republican anti-ideological discourse elucidates. (Habermas, 1981b: 25-71).

Both the Minister and Dupin place their trust in an intersubjective schematics, the Minister being the loser because his rationality principle did not sufficiently allow for the disagreements entering the discursive situation – to speak with Habermas – together with the other participants. Both the Minister and Dupin serve to illustrate to what extent Oedipalistic subjectivity is an illusionary subjective identity formulated within a diagram: the subject is that which coincides with a particular code of meaning. For the Minister this code is one of political power, for Dupin it is intersubjective intelligence. For both the code entails that meaning be made contingent and that the other subjects be predictable. One may conclude, then, that it is characteristic for the diagrammatical Habermassian subject as well as for the Lacanian (or Freudian) Oedipalistic subject that he be defined by and subjected to the very discourse, the speaking and enacting of which constitutes his mastery.

The key to discursive success is the extent to which meaning as a successful representation of a truth can be formulated. This has been termed above as the collapsing of signifier and signified. The key is, therefore, the successful creation of ideological meanings. Of this specifically the queen as woman is the master signifier. Being always that which is merely spoken about, the queen exposes and helps formulate the objectifying, distanced optic of rational insight. If the letter is the fetisj of this optic, then the queen provides the

preconditions for such fetisjism to run its course since her powerlessness allows for the appropriation of the letter in terms of power and intelligence. Ironically, the *billet-doux* at the same stroke enthrones the queen romantically as beloved *and* defines her, the queen, as woman and, as such, as a mere function in the royal household. The value of the *billet-doux* for the narrative as a whole depends on this woman being both queen and woman – functionalised identity and identity by virtue of a function. This is highlighted by the remarkable fact that the real *status quo* is only upset by the illicit *billet-doux* when the latter becomes an item in a power game.

5

The reading presented above could be summarised by stating that the queen in the *Letter* is *the* place where the Lacanian subject of desire becomes a diagrammatical subject who finds himself, albeit and necessarily in forms of illusionary self-identity, at the place where meaning is completely transparent. Semiology has sufficiently proven that meaning is transparent to the degree that it is coded, granting that the codes are allowed to function smoothly, i.e. like truths. The subject, as Lacan has pointed out, is in fact that place where the signifier becomes a temporary signified. This is clearly demonstrated in the social and sexual self-assertion inherent in all references made to the queen in the discourses of Dupin, the Prefect of Police and the narrator. As the above attempted to show, these discourses and references all belong to a larger economy, namely the intelligence by which the Minister might outwit his pursuers which becomes, without changing its basic rationality principle, the scheme by which Dupin might outwit the Minister. The interdependence of schematic insight and sexual/social identity can now be explained more lucidly in terms of displacement as prerequisite to discourse. With this the following is indicated: for both the Minister and Dupin to be masters of their schemes and to construct an implicit intersubjective communication played out on a mental level, they first of all have to be embedded in a set social order, which is that of the court, and they have to identify with this order completely. In this case, “completely” means imperceptibly – without awareness of embedding and identification. Dupin and the Minister are slaves of the very scheme which allocates them temporary phallic mastery because the scheme is itself reversible, being a mere coded meaning, dependent on particular social realities.

In order for the lack/desire force proposed by Lacan to do its work, the fact that both the desired object and the desiring subject are always already mediated must be suppressed. In the *Letter* this is demonstrated by the very signifier status of the purloined item. It becomes an instrument towards power and thus an object of desire only to the degree that the very terms which give it this status – its meaning with respect to courtly and political *status quo* – is forgotten, even in the act which makes full use of this social denotation inherent to the letter. To put it briefly, the letter *has* to belong to the queen to be alienated from its owner and to become a fetisj for someone else. By the same token this suppressed denotative value of the letter is the

suppressed precondition for the game of intersubjective intelligence played out between Dupin, the Minister and, to a lesser extent, the Prefect of Police.

The desire/lack configuration therefore gives rise to a process in which a subject can endlessly repeat himself in various forms of self-identity whilst believing that he is still the same unique and closed subject and master of his discourse or other actions. This is the result of the in-built condition of the Lacanian psychoanalytical schematics which states that the object of desire is always coded and can therefore change its coding incessantly.

The desire/lack configuration produces a purely *grammatical* subject who finds his identity in particular forms of illusionary fulfilled speech – the scientific discourse for example – as much as he maintains it in anti-discursive *écriture* – that form of writing which exhaustively refers only to itself as process by subverting all invading orders of meaning and by codifying codification itself. In the latter case, displacement is inserted into the economy of writing as the master code. The implicit grammaticality of psychoanalytically based displacement theories is most clearly depicted where displacement itself becomes the formula for the dialogue between text and reader and between text and text. The latter case is represented by *écriture*, the former by what might be termed “aesthetics of displacement” and for which some of the work of Shoshana Felman is exemplary, particularly Felman’s reading of James (Felman, 1982: 94–207).

For displacement to apply itself as such, it has to have a mirror image of itself at hand – a model of its own truth. The result of the paradox with which displacement theories are confronted has been pointed out by Derrida in his reading of Lacan’s reading of the *Letter* (Derrida, 1975:3). Displacement theory has to find a metaphysical formula which will enable it to read text and reader and text and text together repetitively, even when this reading together is based on foregrounding the dispersal of meaning orders and the dissemination of codes, as Barthes reading of *Sarrasine* might demonstrate (Barthes, 1974). To put it inversely: at that moment when displacement names itself and applies itself, as the psychoanalyst does when he becomes the analyst to an analysand, it has already imperceptibly introduced a metaphysical, logocentricising formula into its practice. This formula incessantly produces the dilemma of the split subject or the power of anti-discursive writing, creating a split reader. Displacement claims to be able to appropriate *at the same time and in the same movement* the sign it focuses on – text, analysand, etc. – as signifier and split in itself *and* its own focussing as part of a displacing process.

Displacement tries to actualize its own being part of displacing processes whilst applying displacement as model. The formula which allows for this is implicit in this description: displacement theory masters its own displacement by stating it as a theory.

As such it repeats the semiotic gesture as postulated by Kristeva:

“... *Semanalysis* carries on the semiotic discovery ... it places itself at the service of social law which requires systematization, communication, exchange. But if it is to do this ... the subject of the semiotic metalanguage must, however, briefly, call himself in question, must emerge from the protective shell of a

transcendental ego within a logical system, and so restore his connexion with that negativity – drive-governed, but also social, political and historical – which renews and renews the social code.” (1975: 55).

In order to actualise the bid at including itself in the very processes it objectifies, displacement aesthetics, like semiotics, reverts to the conventional, metaphysical and humanist mode of achieving this – it devises a formula. This formula describes the insertion of the reading, writing or analysing subject into the objects he directs himself at as a repeatable unit of (non-) subject and process/practice. Developed as a model to ground theory in practices, it actually is the very mode which describes a completely new “practice”: that of theory objectifying itself so as to be able to see itself as a practice. Displacement theory and displacement aesthetics⁴ is not a model, but a formula, collapsing notions of theory and practice and the forms of psychodynamics and society (subject and language orders) to create a new text.⁵ It is, however, part and parcel of this new text that it should want to be able to repeat itself, to appropriate realities of reading, writing and analysis. It is, to summarise once more, a supremely metaphysical text which aims at power. The only way out of this is, as the work of Lyotard or Deleuze/Guattari might illustrate, to abolish all models, including models which conflate theory and practice, altogether, with results for theoretical discourse which could almost be called devastating. The paradox of displacement reading and writing allows for another perspective, though. This paradox is the inability of displacement theory to displace itself indefinitely. However, the very formula of desire/lack and the subject’s dialectical insertion into existing orders of language, thought and society is, as Derrida has pointed out, that which displaces the theory. This displacement cannot be observed when it simply serves to illustrate the consistency and applicability of the displacement formula. Such a demonstration of the consistency of a given reader/text relationship is, for example, visible in Felman’s psychoanalytically based reading practice:

As a performative figure of the ironic textual force of reversal and of chiasmus, the ‘turn of the screw’ – or *The Turn of the Screw* – acts out, indeed, the very narrative . . . of reading. While the reader thus believes he holds and comprehends the story, it is in effect the story which holds and comprehends the reader. (1982: 184).

The metonymical chain in which displacement practices of literature should continuously find themselves will be the social, political or philosophical scenarios. In these scenarios the theory is confronted with the objects of its own desire which, in Kirsteva’s case might be the political subject and in Felman’s case the subject of the retrieval of non-grammatical, unspeakable meaning, or the subject of the lost meaning – of himself as much of the literary text. Displacement’s own object of desire is the place where its model fails finally and where it is confronted with madness or mere irrecupable language such as that of the psychotic speaker analysed by Deleuze (Deleuze, 1981).

Oedipalism can be subjected to a reappraisal in these terms. It does not denote an irreversible psychodynamic given as Freud introduced and Lacan maintains. Rather, it allows for a theoretical economy which reads meaning

as irreducible code and the subject as the activity of this coding together. To achieve this, it has to accept the power of existent codings. This acceptance is at the basis of Oedipalism. It leads to the implicit maintenance of the separate identities of texts and of sexualised subjects – identities which shape both text and subject *and* constrain them. As such, freedom, liberation and revolution can eventually only be described in liberalist modes of eating away at the existing orders by subtle language order subversion. This is highlighted in the practices of *écriture*. It has to maintain a distinction between psychotic, schizophrenic speech and literary speech. For this reason it fails to account for revolutionary practices of the third world, of violent and inhuman nature and of extreme dogmatism.

The outline above has attempted to explain this failure by pointing out the function of coding as illusionary truth within the desire/lack schematics itself. It has attempted to show that meaning codification in the mode of the Lacanian S/s facilitates *power*. Whilst it allows another subject to speak, it can do so only by placing, in advance, the dialogic partner into a model. This is relevant to the analyst-analysand situation as much as it is to Dupin's masterly intersubjective scheme. Where the analyst might fail however, Dupin succeeds because the social codes are given and accepted by all parties concerned. The outline can be summarised by stating that Oedipus allows for an economy of role playing.

In the final two sections following below, the point will be elucidated briefly with reference to Habermas' proposal of selfreflective discourse. The democratic, emancipated discourse which thematises *itself as the encoding of meanings* appears to be the opposite of Oedipal dialectics. It can be shown to be its supreme fulfillment. The closing section refers back to the woman, the *Letter* and the text-reader relationship.

A crucial question here, which the article will not attempt to answer finally but should like to state, is whether the displacement model fails because it can only be applied to discourse, practices and societies the subjects of which accept that values and meanings will always be coded, economised and thus relayed to economies of exchange. Such economies are effective and foster the co-operative acceptance of their subjects since the coding they systematise both alienates direct power *and* allocates it, giving "everybody" a fair share and an opportunity to utter his discourse. In such a liberal economy of exchange, meaning might be coded and thus alienated, but the system remains intact – as Barthes' reading of *Sarrasine* points out (op. cit.).

6

The relevance of Habermas' proposal to the argument followed in this article rests in the fact, not admitted as such by Habermas, that linguistic, dialogically formulated truths are equated with a scheme. Following Habermas' device (Habermas and Luhmann, 1971: 101–104; Habermas, 1970: 62; 1981b: 25–71) this schematics is provided by Austins speech act theory. Habermas first of all accentuates the fact that a constative is always embedded within a performative linguistic act. Accepting thus the illocutionary nature of speech

and discourse, the model then foregrounds the felicity conditions of illocution as *the* conditions for meaning to be constituted in discursive exchange. These conditions entail in particular certain shared presuppositions *re* the validity of what is being formulated linguistically, the truthfulness of intent and the competence implied by the utterance. Speech is thus divorced from subjective intent or grammatical deep structures and made dependent on implicit conditions of functionality. The speaking subject is he whose speech is placed securely within an already present speech act convention which frames his utterance. Meaning depends on the implicit adherence to the authority of communicative conditions. It is therefore the result of the pragmatically successfully performed speech act. For Habermas, this always already present frame attains the status of a universal given since it is embedded in language itself. To come to this conclusion, Habermas must grant linguistics such as developed by Austin the status of truth. Scientific analysis provides systems which are transparent unto ultimate givens. The power of the application depends on the validity of linguistic systems. This enables the view that there are universal givens for discourse. On these grounds, Habermas can apply speech act theory to state that the possibility of reciprocal verbal exchange is embedded in the human speech act. The possibility of reciprocal verbal exchange as basis of meaning itself and as constitutive of meaning is the iterative aspect of the speech act, and not a particular ideal signified.

In this way linguistic, dialogic truth is equated with a scheme. Through this scheme, meaning is constituted purely symbolically. The Habermasian proposal therefore reads like a schematics for symbolic meaning, i.e. for the temporary unity of signifier and signified, to be successfully actualised and to be reproduced by all partakers of a dialogic discourse. The partakers and subjects of such a discourse are consequently at once completely autonomous and completely predefined within and by the scheme. By making meaning dependent on the pragmatics of the verbal exchange itself, their very speech becomes an act of identification with meaning as that which can be constituted reciprocally. This identification grants them autonomy as speaking subjects, defined by what they say only and by how they say it in the discursive dialectics. This application of speech act theory appears to use lack itself as structural base for felicitous illocutionary acts. It uses a formula in which signified and signifier are already unified and placed together firmly within a given structure, i.e. that of felicity conditions. These conditions are repeated endlessly, leading always to fulfilled discursive meanings. The structure preconditions the speakers who will actualise it into set roles. These roles are outlined clearly by Habermas. The dialogic partners are to discuss their own discursive roles critically, exposing these to the suppressed ideological validifications the social or scientific system is providing. They are to objectify themselves as ideological subjects. The purpose of Habermas' application is, amongst others, to provide a social and scientific structure which allows for such an objectification of hidden ideological speech validifications from a position *outside* the latter. The discursive subjects are to discuss themselves whilst remaining themselves, i.e. whilst retaining the ability to formulate new meanings in new validity frameworks. This is possible, as Habermas argues,

because the discourse he foresees and defends, is to make its formulations completely dependent on the condition of shared presuppositions. The discursive partners are to agree not merely to disagree, but to make the disagreement of the other into a felicity condition. In this way and by this practice, ideologically based social, political or subjective validifications of utterances cannot but be exposed, allowing for a criticism of ideology based on communicative rationality. Under the pressure of such ideological exposure, Habermas maintains, communication is forced to proceed on the basis of a rationality principle if it wants to proceed at all.

The proposal is aptly summarised in the following cryptic definition which foregrounds the role of reciprocity and speech act functionality:

Communicative action is ... a symbolically organised interaction which constructs itself according to existent, valid norms defining reciprocal expectations to be understood and accepted by at least two subjects participating in the action (Habermas, 1970: 62)⁵

Speech act theory provides a formula which gives rise to an intersubjective structure. This structure is designed to become its own fulfilled signified. Illocutionary force turns out to be an actualisation of the power of lack/desire to create purely symbolically but absolutely functional meanings. Lack is functionalised in such a way that the difference between the subjective locus of speech and the symbolic order is completely eradicated so that desire seems invisible in Habermas' model. It is elided and replaced by the performative itself which is, in this model, the *medium* of discourse and not merely the hidden structure. The hidden structure is, as stated above, the rules pertaining to pragmatic, felicitous speech acts. The effect of this is that a model is created which maintains that speech about speech is possible *without displacement*, that discursive subjects can refer to themselves as discursive subjects, and to their roles in society, without being subjected to roles again. Dupin and the psychoanalyst would be prime examples of such freedom of role playing. Dupin is a case in point in spite of the fact that he certainly does not thematise ideologically governed validifications of discourse critically as the Habermasian model aims at accommodating. He does, however, represent a discourse which absorbs the reciprocal activity of an other in a plan delineating the motivations and validifications of human behaviour in general and which is constructed on the basis of rationality.

To summarise: the Habermasian proposal of communicative rationality allows for a model of discourse in which participants can act like masters of meaning creation without at any stage being confronted with the subjection to a code which this mastery entails. They are masters by virtue of a code which makes meaning coincide with itself. All confrontations with the other – with the disagreement and with a different value system or social position represented by the dialogic partner – are catered for in advance. Disagreement is equated and constrained by a particular role played by the disagreeing participant whose disagreement is preformulated to suit the dialogue and its rationality principle.

Habermas' model might serve to demonstrate the imperceptible role of power in democratic, critical discourse. Whilst completely dependent on lack/desire, the practising of this discourse suppresses all awareness of lack, replacing this with a belief that meaning can be constructed discursively – a belief in the signified, in other words. Such a belief is concomitant to the belief in intersubjectivity itself as rational understanding. Habermas proposes that understanding is possible as long as the correct, signifying and descriptive terms of understanding can be found. His proposal would depend for its success not on the universal given as Habermas would have it, but on the social validifications of democratic interchange and critical discussion aimed at truth formulations. Eventually, exposure and criticism of ideologies would depend on society's being susceptible to such exposure and criticism. The *imaginary identifications with discursive roles* which the model demands for its actualisation are guaranteed by society which is to be surpassed and objectified in the discourse it itself carries. This would be a society in which the power of meaning as codification is acknowledged. Habermas himself explains clearly that his model is devised for a late-capitalist society – a society the supreme codification of which he himself has analysed extensively (1973).

The conclusion to be arrived at is that the rational, intellectual and critical subject sensitive to the effects of ideology and technology in obscuring true relations between subjects and environment is an Oedipal subject. Like the desire for power the desire for liberation from ideological constraints is relayed on to a coding activity.

We should like to formulate another conclusion. The critical analysis of Habermas effected in the above also demonstrates to which extent all units of self-referential speech, writing or reading, including reading which refers to its own displacement in and by the text, are Oedipalistic. It is characteristic of such self-referential units that they produce things such as freedom of thought, critical formulation, textual dispersion and subversion of meaning, reading as result and practice of such dispersal and subversion and writing as anti-humanist, self-processualising practice. The diversity and radical antagonism between these productions do not mean that the desire/lack and subject/schematics origin of production also differ.

The unit of production in all cases is a unit of self-referential activity in which subjectivity is elided by a role, or a practice, or an involvement with a text in such a way that the basic unit itself remains intact. These are as much the terms of the subversive subject of *écriture* as they are the terms for the super-rational and democratically aware subject of discourse.

Desire facilitates a masquerade in which identity is always replaceable because it is always symbolic. Symptomatic of the effect of desire is the fact that autonomy grows equivalent to the extent to which meaning can be (re-)formulated and to the extent in which new (theoretical) meanings can be produced.

The relevance of the Habermasian socio-philosophical proposal to the context of this article can be stated as follows: granted that Oedipalism is not a psychoanalytical theory or a mere model of certain forms of writing, but rather is a social mechanism, Habermas' model demonstrates to which extent

Oedipalism works imperceptibly to constitute structures of discourse which allows for democratic, critical self-reflection as much as it allows for power to be exerted by discursive meaning production. It describes, in other words, how power can be effected through non-violent, apparently non-suppressive means. It also describes how models of freedom, based on complete self-referentiality, can be erected, even as subvertive practice. It describes, finally, how alternative social structures of living can be erected *within* society and *without* changing that society – something Habermas himself advocates (Habermas, 81a: 37).

The reason for this, which the argumentation above has tried to stipulate is, firstly, that meaning appears and functions like a signified because it is coded and, secondly, that the people, the subjects or actors of this meaning relate to these codings. The latter described the Oedipal mechanism.

Symptomatic if this coding is the silence of woman reduced to a discursive term in the *Letter*. In its turn, this allows for a power game played on the level of intersubjective schematics.

7

In the previous sections an attempt was made to reconstruct the logistics of meaning produced in an intersubjective context where the intention is not to understand by way of confrontation with the unknown, but to understand by laying down the terms for understanding beforehand or by accepting that such terms exist and can be applied in one's own self-interest. The intersubjectivity between the *Letter* and the reader lies somewhere between understanding as nonchalance (*écriture*) and understanding as reciprocity. The reader of the *Letter* is, by implication, asked to accept the text as fiction, to accept that it has a self-reflective, logocentric subject of speech/thought as its author, to, subsequently, deny the economical and discursive shifts between narrating figure, implied author and real author and, in brief, to take the story at face value. As detective story, the *Letter* presents itself as of an intended "trivial" or merely divergent interest, aimed at a particular chair-bound pleasure of reading. The text closes itself around a detective scheme presented as a private, individualistic enterprise relayed essayistically. Typical of the logocentric presentation of the text is the way in which the basic question this story's telling provokes is elided by the very telling. The question is, simply: why should this story be told? Why should it come to being?

The *Letter* allows for many readings without confirming any of them. A feminist criticism of chauvinism is parodied implicitly by the text since it proclaims its own disinterested fictionality as detective story very clearly. Similarly, all modes of social criticism might be read into the story. The text is also indifferent to possible criticism of its superficiality. Its basic communicative mode includes the notion that reading (of this story) is not necessary or essential to any purpose and that enjoyment of it is not prescribed. To criticise anything but the cleverness of the detective would be a private

exercise of the reader, and would be referred back to the reader's orientation. This might raise the *Letter* to the status of being a text of desire the relating of which elides the very meaning it implicitly proposes. Issues such as the interchange between morality and power, between intellectual games and subjective revenge are posed but not concluded. The term "detective story" might be read as signifier, erasing the signified it indicates on purpose and the reader might subsequently be caught up in the displacing effect of this. The point of a good detective story, which is *not* the culprit but the scheme by which he is exposed, is obviously aimed at an intellectual displacement of some kind.

The *Letter* thus creates and draws in a reader who may enter the intersubjective game of reading without any fear of confrontation with loss of self or loss of meaning.

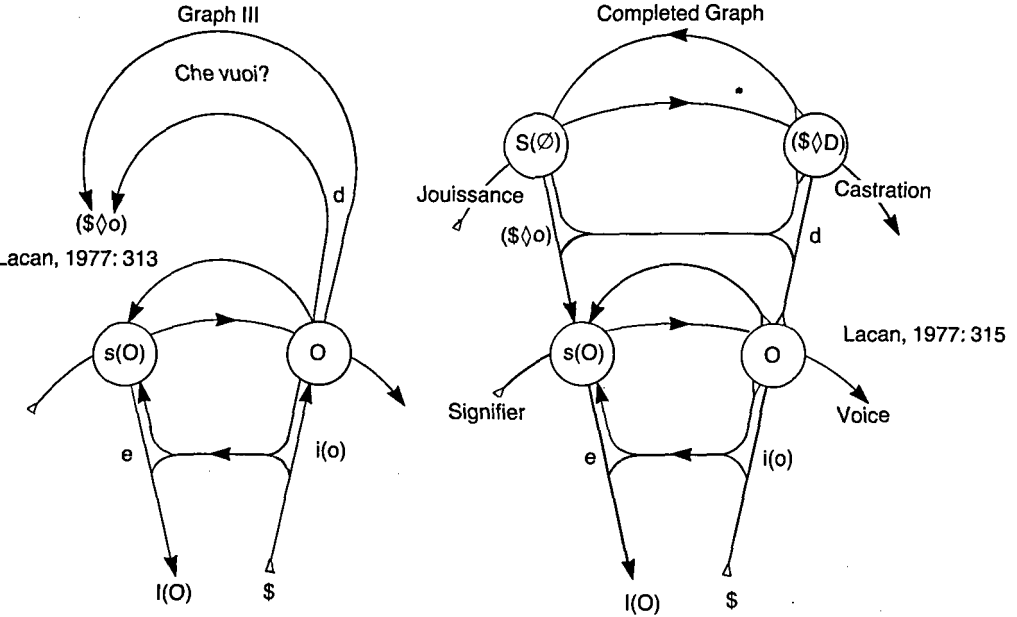
Eventually, even those questions which evoke desire are dissolved in the broader intersubjective code of "mere fiction". The reader is throughout being confirmed in his totality and self-disposal as subject. He never has to realise that this is done by the act of reading itself. The role playing involved in literary reading is never dangerous and therefore never being made aware.

The purpose of this analysis was to show that this kind of fictional contract follows a certain logistics of power typical of *status quo* society. The *Letter has not been read to show its political content or effects, but to demonstrate an intersubjective model relevant to power structures in safe society*. As theorists of *écriture* and semanalysis might point out, the reader remains safely within the realms of the unthreatened symbolic. This also means that he is an Oedipal subject, subjected to Oedipalist mechanisms. The argument proposes that displacement aesthetics has to fail when it tries to objectify and control its own displacement because it would then of necessity subject itself to this mechanism. To put it more concretely: reading the *Letter* is not a displacement *re* absent meanings, however limited, but a small exercise in social and politically relevant *placing* or "placed-ness". Perhaps *jouissance* escapes us because lack has been too firmly implanted in social structures and perhaps, therefore, the question Lacan asks in this regard is a social question rather than a psychodynamic one: "Am I responsible for it then? Yes, probably. Is this *jouissance*, the lack of which makes the Other insubstantial, mine, then? Experience proves that it is usually forbidden me, *not only, as certain fools believe, because of a bad arrangement of society*, but rather because of the fault . . . of the Other if he existed: and since the Other does not exist, all that remains to me is to assume the fault upon 'I', that is to say, to believe in that which experience leads us all, Freud in the vanguard, namely to original sin." (Lacan, 1977: 317).

Notes

1. Afterwards referred to as the *Letter*.

2.



3. See for example the following remarks by Derrida: "The letter will always discover its proper place, a thwarted lack, which is certainly not empirical but transcendental (even better and more certain). It will always be where it always was, always should have been – intangible and indestructible across the detour of a proper and properly circular trajectory." (p.45); "At the very moment when Dupin and the Seminar find the letter, when they find its proper place and course, when they believe the letter is at one place or another as if on a map, a place on a map as if on a woman's body, they no longer see the map itself; not the map described by the text at one moment or another but the map that the text 'is', that it describes, 'itself', like the four-way divergence . . . with no promise of topos or truth." (p.55).
4. For an introduction to displacement with reference to deconstruction, see Krupnick, Mark. 1983. "Derrida and displacement" in the same, *Displacement, Derrida and after*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 1–14. For the feminist application of displacement as "double displacement" see amongst other Féral, Josette, 1981. "Towards a Theory of Displacement" in *Sub-Stance*, nr. 32, pp 52–64. Critical introductions of displacement as reading and discourse analytic practice which this article implicitly refers to include Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty "Displacement and the discourse of woman" in Krupnick, op. cit., pp. 160–195 and Felman, Shoshana, 1977. "Turning the screw of interpretation" in the same (ed.). *Literature and Psychoanalysis. The Question of Reading: Otherwise*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, pp. 94–207. See also the introductory chapter to the same, 1985. *Writing and Madness*. Inthaca, New York: Cornell University Press. An important exploration of displacement as symptom of an analytical critical tool with regard to the Freudian psychoanalytical discourse is Balmary, Mary, 1982. An example of a reversed aesthetics of displacement is to be found in Barthean reading such as that presented in Barthes, Roland. 1975. *The pleasure of*

the text. New York: Hill & Wang, translated by Richard Howard. Displacement and the dialectics of the gaze find a particularly lucid application in present film semiotics especially where they criticise phallogocentrism. See for example de Lauretis, Teresa, 1984. *Alice does'nt. Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd.

5. So, for example, Kristeva's *La révolution du langage poétique* aims at replacing the linguistic-structuralist, ever still metaphysically conceived subjective presence with a processual subject who is his own transformation – a view sustained by the re-introduction of the semiotic, pre-Oedipal thrusts seen as co-existent with Oedipal, symbolic subject identifications. A psychosemiotic construct is developed which redefines the subject as function within *écriture*, or as “gramme”. The “gramme” is self to the degree in which it inverts and digresses on the level of the symbolic, being an aspect of the “thetic act” which forms the core of the dialectically conceived “stasis”. See Kristeva, 1978: 35–42 and 53–55 as well as Kristeva, 1979: 123.
6. Translations by me.

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