

# Retales



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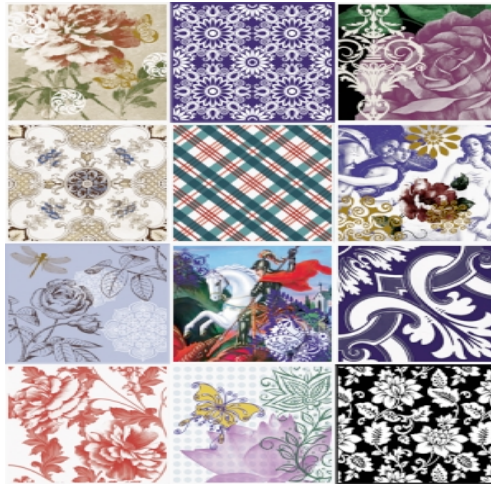
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In Spanish *retal* is an anagram of *letra* made possible only by the letter<sup>1</sup>. It allows us to attempt to write what Jacques Lacan teaches us in his text *Lituraterre*. That which does not cease to not translate itself in this still undeciphered text thus allows us to expound what the text itself puts into act by means of a “literal”, or even literary, demonstration, one distinct from what Lacan attempted by other means as a “scientific” demonstration of the unconscious, if this were possible. It is not, even though this is no reason to stop trying, time and time again. It is in this ever-renewed attempt that lies the value, or even the *agalma*, of the work of reading and writing proper to a Seminar such as the one organised by INES<sup>2</sup>, to which we were so kindly invited. This text is made of the scraps [*retales*] – the leftover pieces of fabric, hide, or metal sheeting – of that work.

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<sup>1</sup> TN. The Spanish word ‘*retal*’ – scraps, remnants or leftovers - is an anagram of ‘*letra*’, the letter.

<sup>2</sup> The XIIIth Seminar for lecturers at the (Institute Nueva Escuela), in its cycle for ongoing formation, held in Buenos Aires on 20 and 21 November 2013.



### ***Lituraterre incognita***

*Lituraterre incognita*, said Jacques-Alain Miller<sup>3</sup> referring to Jacques Lacan's Seminar on *The Sinthome*, the site of exploration of an unspeakable jouissance, a site impossible to represent. *Terra incognita* was the zone that in ancient maps was delimited as a blank zone with imprecise frontiers, an unexplored region without name or possible representation, where at times one found the legend *hic sunt dracones*, here be dragons, fantastic beings. There are various fantastic beings that shelter their enigma in *Lituraterre*, a text that can be read as a treatise of Lacanian geography, also of meteorology, or even of ecology<sup>4</sup>, but which in any case remains an unmarked zone in psychoanalytic geography, a blank page on which something ceases to not write itself in the teaching of Lacan and which will have its subsequent developments. It thus touches on something of the impossible to represent, something of the most real of language. The result is this text which is 'not to be read', as the cover of the *Autres Ecrits* puts it, a text which at times appears uninterpretable, which is because it is itself already presented to us as an interpretation which ought to be read rather than understood.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In his Seminar of 12/01/2005 (unpublished).

<sup>4</sup> This was indicated by Eric Laurent in his intervention at Jacques-Alain Miller's Course, "La experiencia de lo real en la cura psicoanalítica" ["The Experience of the Real in the Psychoanalytic Treatment"], Chapter XVI, Paidós, Buenos Aires, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Several references to orient oneself through *Lituraterre*: Jacques-Alain Miller, in his Course of 1996-1997, "The flight of meaning", Chapter VII, "Monologue of L'apparole" [English version: Jacques-Alain Miller and M. Downing Roberts, *Qui Parle*, Vol. 9, No. 2, Special Issue on Lacan (Spring/Summer 1996), pp. 160-182, University of Nebraska Press]; in his Course of 1998-1999 in collaboration with Éric Laurent, "The Experience of the Real in the Psychoanalytic Treatment", Chapter XI, "The Pathway of the Psychoanalyst", and Chapter XVI "Lacanian Invariants", in Editorial Paidós. Also: Jacques-Alain Miller,

From the beginning we can situate one of the fantastic beings that we encounter in Lacan's text, which functions as its primary argument, as its object in the strict sense: the letter. It is a question of the letter not in its dimension of imprint, of the printed letter as representation of the spoken word, the dimension to which we improperly tend to reduce it, but rather of the letter that is written in the spoken word, of the writing that there is in the saying.

How can the letter be in the spoken word, how can one say that there is a writing in speech? We normally distinguish the act of speaking from the act of writing. If someone says to me "We will meet here tomorrow at the same time" it is very different from finding the same phrase written on a piece of paper. In the latter case I have no clear reference for any of the words. I don't know who has written the phrase, I don't even know if it is addressed to me, nor where or when it has been written, to the extent that the words, 'here' and 'tomorrow at the same time' have lost their referent.

Writing, as Freud says, is the language of absence. In contrast, the spoken word, spoken in a precise situation of enunciation, maintains these referents in a clear and precise manner, or at least we suppose so. Viewed in this way, speaking and writing are two distinct acts, the spoken word and the written word have different functions and conditions. But this is only the case if we reduce them both to two forms of representation of something previous, of thought for example, actually a most ambiguous and imprecise entity, much more so in any case than the signifier or the letter.

The Lacanian hypothesis of the instance of the letter in the unconscious implies that there is a letter in the spoken word, that there is a writing in the saying. Without this dimension the proper function of interpretation in the analytic experience cannot be understood, an operation that not only plays with the signifier as such but which also introduces the dimension of the letter as material support of the signifier, the letter linked to the fact of having a body and to the fact that words necessarily resonate in this body. From this angle, we immediately see that the spoken word is linked with that which resounds in the body from the fact that there is a saying, an enunciation. And it is

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"*L'or à gueule* of *Lituraterre*", in *Hurly-Burly*, Issue 9, May 2013. Éric Laurent, "The Purloined Letter and the Tao of the Psychoanalyst", in *Hurly-Burly*, Issue 9, May 2013. Without forgetting Jacques Lacan's *Seminar XVIII* (1971), "Of a discourse that would not be a semblant", in his lesson of May 12 dedicated to the reading of *Lituraterre*, in Editorial Paidós.

from this angle that speech and the drive – that echo in the body of the fact that there is a saying, as Lacan himself says – are linked to the letter.

The history of writing, taking up the thorny problem of the origin, of the beginnings of writing, sustains that we are sure that there is writing only from the moment in which homophony and play on words are possible. When a young man from the Yoruba tribe sends to a young woman of the same tribe six bread-rings threaded on a branch and receives in reply a thread with eight molluscs attached, after which they decide to contract marriage, we are not only witnessing a ritual that conjugates the oral drive with relations of kinship. One has to know that in the language of the Yoruba, the word ‘*efan*’, means ‘six’ but also ‘in love’, and the word ‘*eyon*’ means ‘eight’ but also ‘agreement’.<sup>6</sup> The bread-rings and the molluscs are in this way elevated to the dignity of a letter as material support of the signifier in order to write a love letter. This is only possible to the degree that play on words and homophony have made their entrance into the reality of discourse.



When a woman finds written in her dream the name ‘*Alguero*’, the town of Cerdeña, associated with the gift, the ‘*regalo*’, that she wishes to give to her partner, we also find a form of writing with which the unconscious treats the signifier. What is involved here is something different from the play on words, it involves taking the letter in its materiality in order to realise an anagram, something closer to the *contrapèterie*, the spoonerism, the play of letters with which Lacan begins his text with the title that continues this same play, *Lituraterre*.

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<sup>6</sup> This example is recorded in the book by Ignace J. Gelb, *A study of writing*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1963. The history of writing most frequently cited by Lacan is the one by James Février, *Histoire de l'écriture*, Payot 1948.

From then on language becomes the set of equivocations that the history of its speakers has allowed to persist in it – the definition of *lalangue* that we find in the Seminar *Encore* – as a deposit of leftovers that the letter comes to materialise, to support, according to the term that Lacan uses in this text. It is this letter that *Lituraterre* transforms into a cut, into a littoral, also into a stroke, *litura*, that is also a leftover, litter. And in a critique of other conceptions he indicates with emphasis that this letter is a product of language, never logically anterior to it; it is a product of language that nevertheless modifies speech.

Saussure's structural linguistics had left in the drawer, with all its consequences, his interesting study on the anagrams discovered in the ancient Latin writings, a study that emerged in 1964<sup>7</sup>, some years after Lacan's 1957 text *The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious*. The deciphered anagrams showed not only the presence of 'a text below a text' but also the operation of the letter that cuts up the text itself following its combinations with the sole object of ciphering a pure jouissance of (de)ciphering. Saussure's linguistic sign here exploits the possibilities of the signifier, beyond the solid laws of metaphor and metonymy in the symbolic articulation of meaning that had defined the structure of language until this moment. And it exploits them in two senses. In the first place, it explodes the unity of the sign that articulates the signifier with the signified, introducing the third element of the letter. But it also exploits the contingencies of this articulation – never arbitrary as Saussure maintained, but always contingent as Lacan maintained – following the combinatory of all the possible trajectories of the letter. Here the letter functions as a cut in knowledge, carving out a hole that, in the measure that one wishes to fill it with meaning, "resorts to invoking jouissance there". Hence the letter, the letter as material principle of *lalangue*, is now converted into a sort of receptacle of jouissance, to the point of draining meaning.

No doubt the work of James Joyce will here be a compass for Lacan at the moment of following the thread of the letter that weaves the text of *Lituraterre*, a literature that is constructed as *sinthome* reduced to a jouissance opaque to meaning. The term *sinthome* is not yet in this text of Lacan, but we can read the letters that might begin to spell out his new knottings. We find one of its marks in the singularity of the

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<sup>7</sup> Thanks to Jean Starobinsky, *Words Upon Words: The Anagrams of Ferdinand de Saussure*, Yale University Press, 1980.

calligraphic letter in Japanese writing that Lacan elevates to the dignity of a singularity of *jouissance* that ‘crushes’ the universal of the signifier. We also find it in the singularity of the letter that falls like drops of rain from the cloud of language in order to inscribe in the real the *ravinement* (the furrowing, the gully that the torrent opens in the earth, leaving traces of its trajectory in the margins), the furrowing then of the signified. Writing, insists Lacan, is this *ravinement* itself, made of leftovers, which makes a hollow in knowledge to lodge a *jouissance*.

### ***Between centre and absence***

At times the detail of a paragraph – a leaf – can tell us something about the structure of the text – the whole plant – depending on how it is selected.

I wanted to pause over the phrase that articulates these last two terms – knowledge and *jouissance* – following the implicit citation of a poet, on page 16 of the French edition and page 35 of the English translation of the text of *Lituraterre*: “Between centre and absence, between knowledge and *jouissance*, there lies the littoral that only fetches to the literal provided you are able to take this very same bend at all times.”

The implicit citation “between centre and absence” is of a poem by Henri Michaux that carries this title. Michaux was someone especially interested in Chinese and Japanese writing, in the oriental calligraphy that runs through all his work, and is undoubtedly one of those who Lacan could call “my literates, if I can make them my companions”<sup>8</sup>. The expression reappears in the following moment of the poem: “It was at our arrival, between center and absence, in Eureka, in the nest of bubbles...” At the point of arrival there is then an encounter – Eureka! – between the two terms, centre and absence, and also between knowledge and *jouissance*. Where do we find knowledge and *jouissance*? It is in effect a question for an end of analysis.

The problem at the moment of deciphering Lacan’s enigmatic phrase is that there is something that doesn’t add up, something that hobbles between the pairs of terms that are presented to us as heterogeneous: *centre* is a geometrical term, relative to space, *absence* is a temporal term, relative to appearances and disappearances. On the

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<sup>8</sup> On page 123 of the Spanish edition of *Seminar XVIII*, reading his text *Lituraterre*. Another poem by Henri Michaux seems to be tailored to Lacan’s text and his operation of reading. It is the poem entitled *J’écris* (I write) and it resonates immediately on the geography of *Lituraterre*.

other hand, *centre* is coupled with *knowledge*, *absence* is coupled with *jouissance*. Knowledge and *jouissance* are also two heterogeneous terms: there is an impossible knowledge of *jouissance*, lacking always a *jouissance* of knowledge. The unknown knowledge of the unconscious and the *jouissance* beyond the phallus, impossible to represent, make present this cut, this discontinuity that the term ‘littoral’ writes in Lacan’s text. The phrase of Michaux cited by Lacan makes present this discontinuity, this littoral that introduces a non-reciprocity between the two terms, each one making an infinite frontier for the other.

But something of the phrase can be clarified if we reintroduce the two terms that are latent antinomies of centre and absence: the *rim* of the periphery, opposed to the *centre*, and the *presence* opposed to the *absence*. This gives rise to the following distribution of the terms:

littoral

<i>Centre</i>	<i>Absence</i>
<i>Rim</i>	<i>Presence</i>

literal

There where knowledge is in the centre there is absence of *jouissance*. Put in another way, there is no possible knowledge of the object of absolute *jouissance*, *das Ding*. There where knowledge is present, *jouissance* becomes the rim of the hole. There where *jouissance* is in the centre, it is knowledge that absents itself, which becomes a rim for that *jouissance*. There is, thus, discontinuity, littoral, rupture, non-intersection between knowledge and *jouissance*, one decentred in relation to the other, each one bordering the hole of the other.

With the letter, in so far as it inscribes this littoral in the real, there is a turning to the literal, we obtain a possible intersection, a passage. The letter thus writes a knowledge of *jouissance* and also ciphers a *jouissance* of knowledge. That of *jouissance* which passes to the unconscious is thus (de)ciphered by the letter as knowledge.

We indicate to conclude that this operation will be read by Lacan only on the return from his voyage to Japan where he has the experience of a ‘little too much’ – “*ce petit peu trop*” is his expression – of the jouissance of the letter that Japanese calligraphy makes present in these works called *kakemono*. That which on the outward journey appeared in the geography as discontinuity of the littoral between centre and absence thus reveals itself as the rim of an irreducible presence, cut out by the letter of *Lituraterre*.



**Translated from the Spanish by *Roger Litten***

**Reviewed by *Florencia F.C. Shanahan***