

## The LETTER and the SEMBLANT

### THE INK AND THE BRUSH Remarks on the Particular and the Universal

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I will make three remarks here concerning the letter and the written [*l'écrit*] on the basis of a reading of 'Lituraterre'<sup>1</sup>, a text written by Lacan in 1971 on his return from his second visit to Japan. When he first visited this country in 1963, he found the means with which to back up his theoretical elaboration of anxiety through his encounter with Buddhist sculpture and with what he detected in it of the object gaze. In 1971, what took place in Japan was an encounter with the letter.

This trip, this 'a bit too much tickling' that Japan did to him with its letter, was what was necessary, as Lacan expresses himself in his seminar *D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*,<sup>2</sup> to give him 'just what was needed' for a new articulation to appear to him with the concept of the 'littoral', through which signifier, signified, writing and jouissance (semblant, letter and object) are knotted together in an articulation that in an effect of *après coup* drew its support from the Japanese letter, namely from calligraphy. It is precisely in relation to Japanese calligraphy that Lacan establishes this tension, this opposition that will be in question here, between the particular, the singular, and the universal.

In 'Lituraterre', underlining what Japanese art demonstrates of the marriage between painting and the letter in the form of calligraphy, Lacan writes: "How am I to say what fascinates me in these things hanging, *kakémono* as they say, hanging from the walls of every museum in those places, bearing inscriptions of characters of Chinese descent, which I know a little and which, although I know them only slightly, enable me to measure what is being elided from them in the cursive, where the singularity of the hand crushes the universal, which is precisely what I teach you as applying only to the signifier: I don't find it very well, but that is because I am a novice."<sup>3</sup> In the presence of the trait, of the trace of the singular, what is elided, what is crushed is the universal value pertaining to the signifier, namely, that a signifier is a signifier for every speaking subject – even if they do not speak the same language.

Of course, and Lacan notes this clearly, the signifying value of the Japanese letter does not disappear for all that; but is covered, charged with a particular form, the resonance of which is such that another dimension unveils itself – where calligraphy rejoins art, "for even when this singularity supports a more stable form,

<sup>1</sup>Jacques Lacan, 'Lituraterre' in *Autres écrits*, Seuil, Paris, 2001, pp. 11-20.

<sup>2</sup>Jacques Lacan, *D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*, Seuil, Paris, 2006, p. 119-120.

<sup>3</sup>Jacques Lacan, 'Lituraterre', *Op. Cit.*, p. 16.

and adds to it the dimension... [of what remains incommensurable with the universal of the signifier] ... namely, what I connote with the small *a*, here made object in being the stake of what wager being won with ink and brush?"<sup>4</sup>

What wager indeed? Could we not say that this wager pertains to this so very paradoxical conjunction between what, on the one side, refers to the extreme of the universal, the pure function of the cut that the signifier operates (and thus the fundamental discontinuity, taken as such, that it introduces) and what, on the other side, is of the register of its singular materiality, which belongs to Being [*l'être*] and its jouissance?

"Erasure of no trace that is prior, this is what constitutes the land [*terre*] of the littoral. Pure *litura*, that is the literal. To produce [this erasure], is reproducing this half without complement in which the subject subsists. Such is the exploit of calligraphy", writes Lacan in 'Lituraterre'.<sup>5</sup>

This half without compliment in which the subject subsists, is there not a rigorous evocation here of the cut, of the Moebian cut with which, in his 1961 Seminar on *Identification*, Lacan indexed the subject as a void, \$, pure division, pure cut, which holds to the fact that the signifier would not know how to signify itself, except in its very fading. And it is indeed this that constitutes the subject as an effect of the signifier, lacking the signifier that would signify him, this subject who is only graspable in his fading. And when the singular of the trait becomes resonant, when the universal value of the letter is crushed, this is what calligraphy realises, thereby incarnating this vacillation, this untenable wavering [*basculement*] of the cut that flashes forth in the instant that follows and bears witness to the subject.

If the universal of science aims at the foreclosure of the subject, calligraphy, on the contrary, is the insistence of the subject, of \$. This is how my first remark can be formulated.

My second remark is that the encounter with calligraphy is not only the occasion for Lacan to reformulate a theory of writing (and this is something that J.-A. Miller recalled at the time of the third Study Day of the Franco-Japanese group in March 1992), but to reconsider his conception of the signifier as well.

First, writing; in 'Lituraterre', Lacan proposes an apologue<sup>6</sup>: from the signifier (which is a storm cloud [*nuée*], a cloud [*nuage*], a semblant), when it breaks, the signified and jouissance start to rain down. And then, when the rain reaches the ground, it hollows it out, it creates channels; in other words, it produces writing and the letter.

Through this little apologue, Lacan establishes the three following points.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

First, the letter is not to be confused with the signifier. The signifier is of the order of the semblant; the letter is something else; it is a materiality secondary to the signifier. As J.-A. Miller recalled, Lacan is replying to Derrida here, who thought that the letter was primary, thereby taking up Lacan's assertions the wrong way round. This is how Lacan condemns this in 'Lituraterre': "What I have inscribed, by means of letters, of the formations of the unconscious in order to fetch them from what Freud formulates of them, as being what they are, effects of the signifier, does not authorise making the letter into a signifier or, moreover, pretending that it has primacy in relation to the signifier."<sup>7</sup> And, in relation to this sliding off-track of the university discourse, he adds: "Such a confused discourse could only have arisen from what concerns me [*m'importe*]" – which is to say the analytic discourse that matters to Lacan [*importe à Lacan*] and is imported without discernment into the university discourse by the scholar to whom the text alludes. Lacan scoffs at this unwise pillaging of his work as follows: "The slightest feeling that the experience to which I attend can only be situated by another discourse", in other words the notion that the discourse of the university and that of the analyst are not the same "should have prevented it from being produced, without admitting it as mine" – in other words, it would have prevented the person pillaging Lacan's work, without citing him, from producing this confused discourse in the first place.

On the basis of the reference to calligraphy, his Japanese experience thus allowed Lacan to clarify that the letter should not be confused with the signifier and that it is, furthermore, not primary in relation to the signifier.

Furthermore, if it carries signification (which is its valence of communication) this signifier, this semblant, from which signified and jouissance rain down, carries jouissance as well. Sexual jouissance, that of the animal, rendered forbidden, unattainable for speaking beings, is transmuted for them into phallic jouissance, which is what the signifier serves as a vehicle for and which is the only jouissance that is permissible, fitted out [*appareillée*] by language, as Lacan later develops in his Seminar *Encore*, in 1972-3.

The signifier is thus a semblant that serves as a vehicle for signification, but also jouissance.

And finally, the letter, which is indeed material, is not a semblant. It presents itself first as a channelling [*ravinement*], a hollowed void, "a pot always ready to receive jouissance".<sup>8</sup> On the one hand then, we have the letter as a condenser of jouissance and on the other we have its signifying value when it is taken up in a chain, in a discourse.

Let us underline, in order to conclude this second remark on the relation between the signifier and the letter and on the bivalence proper to each of them, that Lacan will go on to draw many consequences from it, particularly in his last

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 19.

seminars from R.S.I. on, with his theoretical reformulations based on the topology of the Borromean knot and his elaboration of the supplementary devices [*suppléances*] with which he will be led to double the symbolic ring with S and  $\Sigma$ , symbolic and symptom, symbolic and supplementary device, unconscious and symptom, S1 and S2; so many ways of doubling S by positing a purely signifying element (where knowledge is deployed, unconscious knowledge) and an element charged with jouissance (that of the symptom, of the sinthome, or even of the delusional metaphor). This second element is not taken up in a chain and presents the character of a fixed writing [*écriture figée*]; in other words of a letter.

Here one sees the extent to which the foregrounding of a generalised foreclosure in the last period of Lacan's teaching is exactly correlative to the renewed status of the signifier and the letter, of which he found such a clarifying confirmation in his encounter with Japanese calligraphy.

By way of a conclusion, a third remark will lead us to interrogate the discourses.

Let us compare this "wager being won with ink and brush", as Lacan evokes it, with the utopian hypothesis developed by Jun'ichiro Tanizaki in his celebrated essay *In Praise of Shadows*, in which he imagines what science would have been like if it had emerged in Japan: "I always think how different everything would be if we in the Orient had developed our own science. In fact our conception of physics itself, and even the principles of chemistry, would probably differ from that of Westerners; and the facts we are now taught concerning the nature and function of light, electricity, and atoms might well have presented themselves in a different form."<sup>9</sup>

Such a hypothesis is paradoxical in that it concerns a non-scientific, non-universal hypothesis about science, the dream of a singular science (which is the very reason why the discourse of science did not find in Japan the fertile ground in which it could prosper) to which Tanizaki gives us the key as his essay continues with a comparison between the pen and the brush. "I wrote a magazine article recently comparing the writing brush with the fountain pen, and in the course of it I remarked that if the device had been invented by the ancient Chinese or Japanese it would surely have had a tufted end like our writing brush. The ink would not have been this bluish colour but rather black, something like India ink, and it would have been made to seep down from the handle into the brush. And since we would have then found it inconvenient to write on Western paper, something near Japanese paper... would have been most in demand. Foreign ink and pen would not be as popular as they are; the talk of discarding our system of writing for Roman letters would be less noisy; people would still feel an affection for the old system. But more than that: our thought and our literature might not be imitating

<sup>9</sup>Tanizaki, J., *In Praise of Shadows*, trans. Thomas J. Harper & Edward G. Seidensticker, London, Vintage Books, 2001, p.13-14.

the West as they are, but might have pushed forward into new regions quite on their own. An insignificant little piece of writing equipment, when one thinks of it, has had a vast, almost boundless, influence on our culture."<sup>10</sup>

In fact, the omnipresence of the letter in Japan, with the fascinating dimension of calligraphy which continues there, is one of the reasons that we can evoke to understand the resistance demonstrated in Japan to the universal function and abstract logic that characterises scientific formalisation.

And if, in the West, the combinatory of a very reduced number of letters of the alphabet, allied with a form of writing that has been normalised by the pen, tends to efface the singular imprint of the subject and ensures that our writings, as particular as they may be, nevertheless remain far from being art, in Japan, by contrast, the agalmatic resonance of the letter is maintained and the dimension introduced by calligraphy is preserved.

This letter that fascinates, which condenses jouissance, at the same time does not leave that much room for the signifier; it is there, of course, but it disturbs, like an intruder: this is why the Japanese commonly say that it is only in and through silence that something intense can be produced in inter-human affairs. As far as the knowledge lodged in the signifying chain is concerned, there is a chance that it will be met only with indifference, because the letter is already a purveyor of jouissance.

Of course, this presents an obstacle for psychoanalysis. But, and in order to conclude, let us remark that it is also this that allows for the so very paradoxical link between Japan and Lacan's teaching. For, far from being reduced to an attempt to make human experience conform to an 'everything signifies', the effort of Lacan's elaboration consists, on the contrary, in introducing and securing the incommensurability of the object (in other words, the very thing made present by the dimension of the letter in Japan) in order to include it within a structure that takes science for its model: the structure of discourse. For it is with this heterogeneity, which he demonstrates to be structural, that Lacan supports his teaching.

Translated from the French by Philip Dravers

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<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p.14-15

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