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Enjoy Your Symptom!

Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out

With a new preface by the author



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PREFACE TO THE ROUTLEDGE CLASSICS EDITION

Enjoy Your Symptom—or Your Fetish?

1

There are two ways to understand the thesis that we live in a post-ideological world: either we take it in a naive post-political sense (finally liberated from the burden of great ideological narratives and causes, we can dedicate ourselves to solving pragmatically real problems), or, in a more critical way, as a sign of today's predominant cynicism (today's power no longer needs a consistent ideological edifice to legitimize its rule; it can afford to state directly the obvious truth—search for profits, brutal imposition of economic interests). According to the second reading, there is no longer a need for refined procedure of *Ideologiekritik*, for a “symptomal reading” that detects the faults in an ideological edifice: such a procedure knocks on an open door, since the thoroughly cynical power-discourse concedes all this in advance, like today's analysant who calmly accepts the analyst's suggestions about his innermost obscene desire, no longer being shocked by anything.

Is this, however, effectively the case? If it is, then *Ideologiekritik* and psychoanalysis are today ultimately of no use, since the wager of their interpretive procedure is that the subject CANNOT openly admit and really assume the truth about what s/he is doing. However,

psychoanalysis opens up a way to unmask this apparent proof of its uselessness, by way of detecting, beneath the deceiving openness of post-ideological cynicism, the contours of fetishism, and thus to oppose the *fetishist* mode of ideology, which predominates in our allegedly “post-ideological” era, to its traditional *symptomal* mode, in which the ideological lie which structures our perception of reality is threatened by symptoms, *qua* “returns of the repressed,” cracks in the fabric of the ideological lie. Fetish is effectively a kind of *envers* of the symptom. That is to say, symptom is the exception which disturbs the surface of the false appearance, the point at which the repressed Other Scene erupts, while fetish is the embodiment of the Lie which enables us to sustain the unbearable truth. Let us take the case of the death of a beloved person: in the case of a symptom, I “repress” this death, I try not to think about it, but the repressed trauma returns in the symptom; in the case of a fetish, on the contrary, I “rationally” fully accept this death, and yet I cling to the fetish, to some feature that embodies for me the disavowal of this death. In this sense, a fetish can play a very constructive role of allowing us to cope with the harsh reality: fetishists are not dreamers lost in their private worlds, they are thoroughly “realists,” able to accept the way things effectively are—since they have their fetish to which they can cling in order to cancel the full impact of reality. There is a wonderful early short story by Patricia Highsmith, “Button,” about a middle-class New Yorker who lives with a mongoloid nine-year-old son who babbles meaningless sounds all the time and smiles, while saliva is running out of his open mouth; one late evening, unable to endure the situation, he decides to take a walk on the lone Manhattan streets where he stumbles upon a destitute homeless beggar who pleadingly extends his hand towards him; in an act of inexplicable fury, the hero beats the beggar to death and tears off from his jacket a button. Afterwards, he returns home a changed man, enduring his family nightmare without any traumas, capable of even a kind smile towards his mongoloid son; he keeps this button all the time in the pocket of his trousers—a perfect fetish, the embodied disavowal of his miserable reality, the constant remainder that, once at least, he did strike back against his miserable destiny.

In psychiatric circles, there is a story told about a man whose wife was diagnosed with acute breast cancer and died three months

afterwards; the husband survived her death unscathed, being able to talk coolly about his traumatic last moments with her—how? Was he a cold distanced monster with no feelings? Soon, his friends noticed that, while talking about his deceased wife, he always held in his hands a hamster, her pet object: his fetish, the embodied disavowal of her death. No wonder that, when, a couple of months later, the hamster died, the guy broke down and had to be hospitalized for a long period, treated for acute depression. So, when we are bombarded by claims that in our post-ideological cynical era nobody believes in the proclaimed ideals, when we encounter a person who claims he is cured of any beliefs, accepting social reality the way it really is, one should always counter such claims with the question: OK, but *where is your hamster—the fetish which enables you to (pretend to) accept reality “the way it is”?*

2

The way I proceed to analyze this impregnation of our daily lives by ideology is through the reference to numerous examples—so a note about my (often criticized) use of examples is, perhaps, appropriate here.

The difference between the idealist and the materialist use of examples is that, in the Platonic-idealist approach, examples are always imperfect, they never perfectly render what they are supposed to exemplify, so that we should take care not to take them too literally, while, for a materialist, there is always more in the example than in what it exemplifies, i.e., an example always threatens to undermine what it is supposed to exemplify since it gives body to what the exemplified notion itself represses, is unable to cope with. (Therein resides Hegel's materialist procedure in his *Phenomenology*: each “figure of consciousness” is first staged-exemplified and then undermined through its own example.) This is why the idealist approach always demands a multitude of examples—since no single example is fully fitting, one has to enumerate them to indicate the transcendent wealth of the Idea they exemplify, the Idea being the fixed point of reference of the floating examples. A materialist, on the contrary, tends to repeat one and the same example, to return to it obsessively: it is the particular example which remains the same in all symbolic universes, while

the universal notion it is supposed to exemplify continually changes its shape, so that we get a multitude of universal notions circulating, like flies around the light, around a single example. Is this not what Lacan is doing, returning to the same exemplary cases (the guessing-game with five hats, the dream of Irma's injection), each time providing a new interpretation? Such an example is the *universal Singular*: a singular entity which persists as the universal in the multitude of its interpretations.

In a recent conversation, Hanif Kureishi was telling me about his new novel, whose narrative is different from what he wrote hitherto; I ironically asked him: "But the hero is nonetheless an immigrant with a Pakistani father who is a failed writer . . ." He replied: "What's the problem? Do we not all have Pakistani fathers who are failed writers?" He was right—and this is what Hegel meant by singularity elevated into universality: the pathological twist that Hanif Kureishi experienced in his father is part of EVERY father, there is no normal father, everybody's father is a figure who failed to live up to his mandate and thus left to his son the task to settle his symbolic debts. In this sense, again, Kureishi's Pakistani failed writer is a universal singular, a singular standing in for the universality.

This is what hegemony is about, this short-circuit between the universal and its paradigmatic case (in the precise Kuhnian sense of the term): it is not enough to say that Kureishi's own case is one in the series of the cases exemplifying the universal fact that father is yet another "impossible profession"—one should make a step further and claim that, precisely, we all have Pakistani fathers who are failed writers. In other words, let us imagine being-a-father as a universal ideal which all empirical fathers endeavor to approach and ultimately fail to do: what this means is that the true universality is not that of the ideal being-a-father, but that of failure itself.

Therein resides today's true impasse of paternal authority: in the (biological) father's growing reluctance to accept the symbolic mandate "father"—this impasse is the secret motif that runs through Steven Spielberg's films—*ET*, *Empire of the Sun*, *Jurassic Park*, *Schindler's List*—are variations on this motif. One should remember that the family to whose small boy *ET* appears was deserted by the father (as we learn in the very beginning), so that *ET* is ultimately a kind of "vanishing mediator" who provides a new father (the good scientist

who, in the film's last shot, is already seen embracing the mother)—when the new father is here, ET can leave and “go home.” *Empire of the Sun* focuses on a boy deserted by his family in the war-torn China and surviving through the help of an ersatz-father (played by John Malkovich). In the very first scene of *Jurassic Park*, we see the paternal figure (played by Sam Neill) jokingly threatening the two kids with a dinosaur bone—this bone is clearly the tiny object-stain which, later, explodes into gigantic dinosaurs, so that one can risk the hypothesis that, within the film's fantasmatic universe, the dinosaurs' destructive fury merely materializes the rage of the paternal superego. A barely perceptible detail that occurs later, in the middle of the film, confirms this reading. The pursued group of Neill with two kids take refuge from the murderous carnivorous dinosaurs in a gigantic tree, where, dead tired, they fall asleep; on the tree, Neill loses the dinosaur bone that was stuck in his belt, and it is as if this accidental loss has a magic effect—before they fall asleep, Neill is reconciled with the children, displaying warm affection and care for them. Significantly, the dinosaurs who approach the tree next morning and awaken the sleeping party, turn out to be of the benevolent herbivorous kind. *Schindler's List* is, at the most basic level, a remake of *Jurassic Park* (and, if anything, worse than the original), with the Nazis as the dinosaur monsters, Schindler as (at the film's beginning) the cynical-profiteering and opportunistic parental figure, and the ghetto Jews as threatened children (their infantilization in the film is eye-striking)—the story the film tells is about Schindler's gradual rediscovery of his paternal duty towards the Jews, and his transformation into a caring and responsible father. And is *The War of the Worlds* not the last installment of this saga? Tom Cruise plays a divorced working-class father who neglects his two children; the invasion of the aliens reawakens in him the proper paternal instincts, and he rediscovers himself as a caring father—no wonder that, in the last scene, he finally gets the recognition from his son who, throughout the film, despised him. In the mode of the eighteenth-century stories, the film could thus also have been subtitled “A story of how a working father finally gets reconciled with his son.” One can effectively imagine the film WITHOUT the blood-thirsty aliens: what remains is in a way “what the film really is about,” the story of a divorced working-class father who strives to regain the respect of his

two children. (And one can easily repeat this mental experiment apropos Spielberg's other films: *Jurassic Park* as a film about a father on a trip to wild nature with the two children where they resolve their tensions; *ET* as a film about a frustrated boy in a family abandoned by the father, etc. Of course, one can argue that such a reading is too naively Freudian in the way it reduces the foreign element (aliens, dinosaurs) to a metaphor for family tensions, ignoring the metonymic level of monsters as immanent prolongation of humans, not only their metaphor—however, the answer to this reproach is that such a Freudian reduction is a feature of films themselves, its immanent ideology.) Therein resides the film's ideology: with regard to the two levels of the story (the Oedipal level of the lost and regained paternal authority; the spectacular level of the conflict with the invading aliens), there is a clear dissymmetry, since the Oedipal level is what the story is “really about,” while the external spectacular is merely its metaphoric extension. There is a nice detail in the film's soundtrack which makes clear the predominance of this Oedipal dimension: the aliens' attacks are accompanied by a terrifying one-note low-trombone sound weirdly resembling the low bass and trumpet sound of the Tibetan Buddhist chant, the voice of the suffering-dying evil father (in clear contrast to the “beautiful” five-tones melodic fragment that identifies the “good” aliens in Spielberg's *Encounters of the Third Kind*).

3

But is the ultimate goal of the analysis of ideology not practical: to enable us to intervene and change our reality? Does my jumping from one to another example not contradict this professed goal, condemning us to narcissistic pleasure in theory and thus effectively sabotaging the urgency of practical engagement?

A fake sense of urgency pervades the Left-liberal humanitarian discourse—recall rhetorical figures such as “a woman is raped every six seconds in this country,” or “in the time it takes you to read this paragraph, ten children will die of hunger.” Underlying all this is a sentiment of moral outrage. This pseudo-urgency was exploited by Starbucks a couple of years ago, when, at the entrance, posters greeted customers pointing out that half or so of their profits went to the health

care of the children of Guatemala (from where their coffee originates), so that, with every cup you drank, you so to speak, saved a child's life. There is a fundamental anti-theoretical edge to it—the underlying point is here: no time to reflect on all of it, we have to ACT NOW. (See, against this, Marx's wonderful letter to Engels from 1870, when, for a brief moment, it seemed that a European revolution was again at the gates: in this letter, he conveys his sheer panic—can't the revolutionaries wait for a couple of years, since he, Marx, had not yet finished his *Capital*?). Through this fake sense of urgency, the post-industrial rich, living in their secluded virtual world, not only do not deny or ignore the harsh reality outside their area, they actively refer to it all the time. As Bill Gates recently put it: "What do computers matter when millions are still unnecessarily dying of diarrhea?"

Nothing demonstrates better the fake nature of this sense of urgency than the reverberations of the cover story of the *Time* magazine in the Summer of 2006, reporting that around four million people died there as the result of political violence in the last decade, and no usual humanitarian uproar followed—as if some kind of filtering mechanism blocks these news from achieving their full impact on our symbolic space. The Congo is today effectively re-emerging as a Conradian "heart of darkness" that no one dares fully to confront. Do we need more proofs that the humanitarian sense of urgency is mediated/overdetermined by clear political considerations—which considerations? To answer this question, we need precisely to step back and take a look.

When, in a critical analysis of the present global constellation, one offers no clear solution, no "practical" advice on what to do, when one paints no light at the end of the tunnel (well aware that this light might belong to a train crashing towards us), one is usually reproached: "So what should we do, nothing? Just sit and wait?" One should gather the courage to answer: YES, precisely that! There are situations where the only truly "practical" thing to do is to resist the temptation to engage immediately, and to "wait and see" by means of a patient critical analysis. Engagement seems to exert its pressure on us from all directions. In a well-known passage from his *Existentialism is Humanism*, Sartre deployed the dilemma of a young man in France in 1942, torn between the duty to help his lone, ill mother and the duty to enter

Resistance and fight the Germans; Sartre's point is, of course, that there is no *a priori* answer to this dilemma—the young man should make a decision grounded only in his own abyssal freedom, assuming full responsibility for it. An obscene third way out of this dilemma would have been to advise the young man to tell his mother that he will join the Resistance, and to tell his Resistance friends that he will take care of his mother, while, in reality, withdrawing to a secluded place and studying. There is more than cheap cynicism in this advice—it brings to mind a well-known Soviet joke about Lenin. Under Socialism, Lenin's words to young people, his answer to what they should do, "Learn, learn, and learn," were evoked all the time, displayed on all school walls. So here is how the joke goes: Marx, Engels and Lenin are asked what would they prefer to have: a wife or a mistress. As expected, Marx, rather conservative in private matters, answers "A wife!", while Engels, more of a *bon vivant*, opts for a mistress; however, to everyone's surprise, Lenin says: "I would like to have both of them!" Why? Is there a hidden strike of decadent *jouisseur* to his austere revolutionary image? No—he explains: "So that I can tell my wife that I am going to my mistress, and my mistress that I have to be with my wife." "And then, what do you do?" "I go to a lone place to learn, learn, and learn!" Is this not exactly what Lenin did after the catastrophe of 1914? He withdrew to a lone place in Switzerland, where he "learned, learned, and learned," reading Hegel's logic. And, perhaps, this is what we should do today.

INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW REVISED EDITION

From Desire to Drive . . . and Back

The present book was first published in 1992, as an attempt to introduce the doctrine of Jacques Lacan to the American public via Hollywood cinema. How are we to judge the receptivity of American academia to Lacan now, almost ten years later? One of the stories that snobbish French Lacanians like to quote against translating *jouissance* as “enjoyment”—with, of course, an undertone of French arrogance and a patronizing stance toward the American scene—is that Lacan, on his first visit to the United States, watched in Baltimore a TV commercial with the motto “Enjoy Coke!” and, dismayed at its vulgarity, emphatically claimed that his *jouir* is NOT this “enjoy.” Against this argument, one should claim that “enjoy” in the unfortunate “Enjoy Coke!” precisely is the *jouir* in its superego imbecility, what better example of Lacan’s thesis that superego is an injunction to enjoy than “Enjoy Coke”? Is there, then, a hope for the breakthrough of Lacanian theory in the United States?

Whatever the vicissitudes and deformations of Lacan in cultural studies, one should focus on what happens with children in their early age, following the wise Jesuit motto, “Give me a child till he is seven, and afterward you can do with him whatever you want.” So I am tempted to claim that there is hope for us Lacanians as long as American children are massively exposed to Shel Silverstein’s two

classic books, *The Missing Piece* and *The Missing Piece Meets the Big O*; one is almost embarrassed by the direct way these two books render in naked form the basic matrix of the Lacanian opposition of desire and drive. The first book tells of the adventures of an it, a circle with a point for an eye and a triangular gap for a mouth, a subject in search of a missing piece that would fill in the gap and thus change it into a complete circle, somewhat like the perfect spheric human being preceding sexual difference from Plato's *Symposium*: "It was missing a piece. And it was not happy. So it set off in search of its missing piece. And as it rolled it sang this song: 'Oh I'm lookin' for my missin' piece/I'm lookin' for my missin' piece/Hi-dee-ho, here I go,/Lookin' for my missin' piece.'" ¹ So after a long journey full of adventurous encounters, one day it finds a triangular missing piece that will fill its void; however, the piece tells him, "Wait a minute! I am not your missing piece. I am nobody's piece. I am my own piece. And even if I was somebody's missing piece I don't think I'd be yours!" So it sadly rolls on, finds another piece that is too small, another that is too big, another too sharp, another too square, another that it doesn't hold tightly enough and thus loses, another that it holds too tightly and thus breaks. Finally it encounters a triangular piece that seems to be just right and asks, "'Are you anybody else's missing piece?'" The piece answers, "'Not that I know of.'" "'Well, maybe you want to be your own piece?'" "'I can be someone's and still be my own.'" So they get together and they fit perfectly, forming a perfect sphere. Because it is now complete, it rolls faster and faster, but, for that reason, it cannot smell a flower or talk to a worm. Could it still sing? It began to sing: "'I've frown my nizzin' geez/Uf vroun my mitzin' breez.'" Now that it was complete, it could not sing at all! So it stopped rolling, set the piece down gently, rolled away and started to sing softly "'Oh I'm lookin' for my missin' piece/I'm lookin' for my missin' piece.'" It is the paradox of *desire* at its purest: in order to sustain itself as desire, to articulate itself (in a song), a piece must be missing. Do we not have here the matrix of Robert Schumann's tragedy? His fate was the opposite of a standard lover caught in an unhappy love affair and dreaming about happy unification with his beloved—his deadlock was that his wishes were realized—life spared him the disappointment of unhappy love—so that his position was that of a lover united forever with his

beloved and dreaming about some new obstacle that would make the beloved distant. It is no wonder that the outcome was a psychotic breakdown: “ ‘Things were far more beautiful when one imagined them breaking,’ Schumann would say to himself. Was not the mere idea of a possible setback more agreeable than the certainty of familiar things?’ ”²

The trajectory of Freud's and Lacan's theory goes from desire to drive. It is no surprise, then, that *The Missing Piece*, which narrates the myth of how the it (the Lacanian lamella) constitutes itself as desiring subject through a lack, was followed six years later by *The Missing Piece Meets the Big O*, which tells the story as it were from the opposite end: not from the standpoint of the desiring subject looking for its missing piece, but from the standpoint of the missing piece itself. This piece is not the Freudian partial object satisfied to remain its own piece, like the first piece encountered by the it in the first book, but the piece that is sitting alone, waiting for someone to take it. Here, of course, problems emerge: some who come along fit but cannot roll, others can roll but do not fit; some are too delicate; some put the piece on a pedestal and leave it there; some have too many pieces missing; some have “too many pieces, period”; some look too closely at the piece, while others roll by without even noticing it. The piece tries to make itself more attractive, but it doesn't help; it tries being flashy, but this just frightens away the shy ones. At last one it comes along that fits just right, looking like the it from the first book, so, as in the first book, they form a perfect sphere and start to roll happily. However, once inserted into the it, the missing piece begins to grow and grow; the it drops the piece out and goes away, complaining “ ‘I'm lookin' for my missin' piece, one that that won't increase.’ ” Then, one day, an it comes along that looks different: a perfect circle in itself. The piece, a good Lacanian partial object, asks the it the obvious *Che vuoi?* question: “What do you want of me?” “ ‘Nothing’ ” is the answer. “ ‘What do you need from me?’ ” asks the piece, putting its bets on the distinction between demand and need. Again, “ ‘Nothing.’ ” “ ‘Who are you?’ ” “ ‘I am the big O,’ ” in short, the primordial, noncastrated big Other who, as such, wants nothing. “ ‘Maybe I am your missing piece?’ ” asks the piece, to which the big O answers, “ ‘But I am not missing a piece. There is no place you would fit.’ ” “That is too bad,” says the missing piece. “ ‘I was hoping that perhaps I could roll with you . . .’ ” “You cannot roll with

me,' ” says the big O, “ ‘but perhaps you can roll by yourself.’ ‘By myself? A missing piece cannot roll by itself.’ ‘Have you ever tried?’ ‘But I am not shaped for rolling.’ ‘Corners wear off and shapes change,’ ” says the big O, and rolls away. Alone again, the missing piece lifts itself, flops over, and slowly learns to roll; its edges begin to wear off, and soon it goes on carelessly rolling instead of bouncing, rejoining the big O, accompanying it, attached to it as a small sphere on the border of the large sphere, the small other clinging, like a parasite, to the big Other, the two together forming a perfect example of the “inner eight,” the matrix of the self-perpetuating repetitious circulation of the drive.

Apart from some minor corrections of typographical errors, the big difference between the first and this edition of the book is a new substantial final chapter, focusing on the fantasmatic support of the notion of reality. Since my standard book formula is for a length of six chapters, and since the book had in its first edition only five chapters, it is only now, after the delay of eight years, that *Enjoy your symptom!* effectively became my book.

NOTES

- 1 See Shel Silverstein, *The Missing Piece* (New York: HarperCollins 1975), and Shel Silverstein, *The Missing Piece Meets the Big O* (New York: Harper-Collins 1981).
- 2 Dominique Druhen, notes to the Siegfried Jerusalem/Elena Bashkirova recording of *Dichterliebe and Liederkreis* (Erato 1992), p. 8–9.

INTRODUCTION

I have always found extremely repulsive the common practice of sharing the main dishes in a Chinese restaurant. So when, recently, I gave expression to this repulsion and insisted on finishing my plate alone, I became the victim of an ironic “wild psychoanalysis” on the part of my table neighbor: is not this repulsion of mine, this resistance to sharing a meal, a symbolic form of the fear of *sharing a partner*, i.e., of sexual promiscuity? The first answer that came to my mind, of course, was a variation on de Quincey’s caution against the “art of murder”—the true horror is not sexual promiscuity but sharing a Chinese dish: “How many people have entered the way of perdition with some innocent gangbang, which at the time was of no great importance to them, and ended by sharing the main dishes in a Chinese restaurant!”

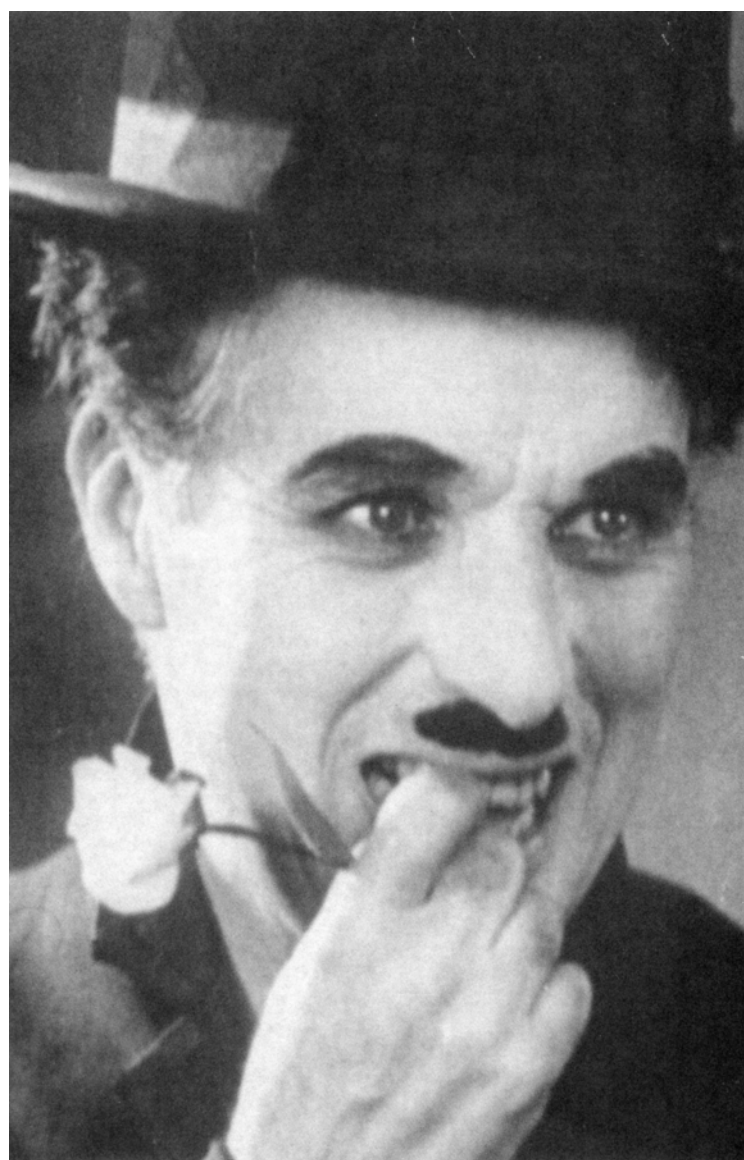
Such a shift of accent (an exemplary case of what Freud called “displacement”) underlies the comical effect of *understatement*, allegedly characteristic of the English sense of humor and so much admired by Hitchcock. Yet we are here far from indulging in affected wisecracking: the point is rather that this de Quinceyan “displacement” enables us to discern the logic of a split which, as a kind of fatal flaw, is at work in the Enlightenment from its very beginning. That is to say, when, in his programmatic text *What Is Enlightenment?*, Immanuel Kant provides the famous definition of Enlightenment as “man’s release from his

selfincurred tutelage,” i.e., his courage to make use of his understanding without direction from another, he supplements the motto “Argue freely!” by “Argue as much as you will, and about what you will, but obey!” This and not “Do not obey but argue!” is, according to Kant, the Enlightenment’s answer to the demand of traditional authority, “Do not argue but obey!” We must be careful here not to miss what Kant is aiming at—he is not simply restating the common motto of conformism, “In private, think whatever you want, but in public, obey the authorities!” but rather its opposite: in public, “as a scholar before the reading public,” use your reason freely, yet in private (at your post, in your family, i.e., as a cog in the social machine) obey authority! This split underlies the famous Kantian “conflict of the faculties” between the faculty of philosophy (free to indulge in arguing about what it will, yet for that reason cut off from social power—the performative force of its discourse being so to speak suspended) and the faculties of law and theology (which articulate the principles of ideological and political power and are therefore devoid of the freedom to argue). The same split occurs already in Descartes who, prior to entering the way of universal doubt, established a “provisional morality,” a set of rules regulating his everyday existence for the time of his philosophical journey: the very first rule emphasizes the need to obey the customs and laws of the country into which he was born without questioning their authority . . . In short, I am free to entertain doubts about anything, about the very existence of the universe, yet for all that I am compelled to obey the Master—or, as the de Quinceyan version of it would run: “How many people have entered the way of perdition with some innocent doubt about the existence of the world around them, which at the time was of no great importance to them, and ended by treating their superiors with insufficient respect!”

The ideological attitude opened up by this split, of course, is that of cynicism, of cynical distance which pertains to the very notion of Enlightenment and which today seems to have reached its apogee: although officially undermined, devalorized, authority returns through the sidedoor—“we know there is no truth in authority, yet we continue to play its game and to obey it in order not to disturb the usual run of things . . .” Truth is suspended in the name of efficiency: the ultimate legitimization of the system is that it works. In Eastern

Europe's now-defunct "really existing socialism," the split was that between a public ritual of obedience and private cynical distance, whereas in the West, the cynicism is in a way redoubled: we publicly pretend to be free, whereas privately we obey. In both cases, we are victims of authority precisely when we think we have duped it: the cynical distance is empty, our true place is in the ritual of obeying—or, as Kurt Vonnegut put it in his *Mother Night*: "We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be."

In contrast to what the media desperately endeavor to convince us, *the enemy today is not the fundamentalist* but the cynic—even a certain form of "deconstructionism" partakes in the universal cynicism by proposing a more sophisticated version of the Cartesian "provisional morality": "In theory (in the academic practice of writing) deconstruct as much as you will and whatever you will, but in your everyday life, play the predominant social game!" The present book was written with a view to bringing to public notice the nullity of cynical distance. Its subtitle is not to be taken ironically: it simply refers to the two divisions of each chapter. As it is indicated by their didactic titles ("Why . . ."), the aim of each of the five chapters is to elucidate some fundamental Lacanian notion or theoretical complex (*letter, woman, repetition, phallus, father*). In the first division of each chapter, Lacan is "in Hollywood," i.e., the notion or complex in question is explained by way of examples from Hollywood or popular culture in general; in the second division, we are "out of Hollywood," i.e., the same notion is elaborated as it is "in itself," in its inherent content. Or, to put it in Hegelese: Hollywood is conceived as a "phenomenology" of the Lacanian Spirit, its appearing for the common consciousness, whereas the second division is closer to the "logic" *qua* articulation of the notional content in and for itself.



1

WHY DOES A *LETTER* ALWAYS ARRIVE AT ITS DESTINATION?

1.1 DEATH AND SUBLIMATION: THE FINAL SCENE OF *CITY LIGHTS*

The trauma of the voice

It may seem peculiar, even absurd, to set Chaplin under the sign of “death and sublimation”: is not the universe of Chaplin’s films, a universe bursting with nonsublime vitality, vulgarity even, the very opposite of a damp romantic obsession with death and sublimation? This may be so, but things get complicated at a particular point: the point of the intrusion of the voice. It is the voice which corrupts the innocence of the silent burlesque, of this pre-Oedipal, oral-anal paradise of unbridled devouring and destroying, ignorant of death and guilt: “Neither death nor crime exist in the polymorphous world of the burlesque where everybody gives and receives blows at will, where cream cakes fly and where, in the midst of the general laughter, buildings fall down. In this world of pure gesticularity, which is also the world of cartoons (a substitute for lost slapstick), the protagonists are generally immortal . . . violence is universal and without consequences, there is no guilt.”¹

The voice introduces a fissure into this pre-Oedipal universe of immortal continuity: it functions as a strange body which smears the innocent surface of the picture, a ghost-like apparition which can never be pinned to a definite visual object; and this changes the whole economy of desire, the innocent vulgar vitality of the silent movie is lost, we enter the realm of double sense, hidden meaning, repressed desire—the very presence of the voice changes the visual surface into something delusive, into a lure: “Film was joyous, innocent and dirty. It will become obsessive, fetishistic and ice-cold.”² In other words: film was Chaplinesque, it will become Hitchcockian.

It is therefore no accident that the advent of the voice, of the talking film, introduces a certain duality into Chaplin’s universe: an uncanny split of the figure of the tramp. Remember the three great Chaplin talking films: *The Great Dictator*, *Monsieur Verdoux*, *Limelight*, distinguished by the same melancholic, painful humor. All of them turn on the same structural problem: that of an indefinable line of demarcation, of a certain feature, difficult to specify at the level of positive properties, the presence or the absence of which changes radically the symbolic status of the object:

Between the small Jewish barber and the dictator, the difference is as negligible as that between their respective moustaches. Yet it results in two situations as infinitely remote, as far opposed as those of victim and executioner. Likewise, in *Monsieur Verdoux*, the difference between the two aspects or demeanours of the same man, the lady-assassin and the loving husband of a paralysed wife, is so thin that all his wife’s intuition is required for the premonition that somehow he “changed.” . . . the burning question of *Limelight* is: what is that “nothing,” that sign of age, that small difference of triteness, on account of which the funny clown’s number changes into a tedious spectacle?³

This differential feature which cannot be pinned to some positive quality is what Lacan calls *le trait unaire*, the unary feature: a point of symbolic identification to which clings the real of the subject. As long as the subject is attached to this feature, we are faced with a charismatic, fascinating figure; as soon as this attachment is broken, all that remains is dreary remnants. The crucial point, however, not to be

missed is how this split is conditioned by the arrival of the voice, i.e., by the very fact that the figure of the tramp is forced to *speak*: in *The Great Dictator*, Hinkel speaks, while the Jewish barber remains closer to the mute tramp; in the *Limelight*, the clown on the stage is mute, while the resigned old man behind the stage speaks . . .

Chaplin's well-known aversion to sound is thus not to be dismissed as a simple nostalgic commitment to a silent paradise; it reveals a far deeper than usual knowledge (or at least presentiment) of the disruptive power of the voice, of the fact that the voice functions as a foreign body, as a kind of parasite introducing a radical split: the advent of the Word throws the human animal off balance and makes of him a ridiculous, impotent figure, gesticulating and striving desperately for a lost balance. Nowhere is this disruptive force of the voice made clearer than in *City Lights*, in this paradox of a silent movie with a sound track: a sound track without words, just music and a few typified noises of the objects. It is precisely here that death and the sublime erupt with full force.

The tramp's interposition

In the whole history of cinema, *City Lights* is perhaps the purest case of a film which, so to speak, stakes everything on its final scene—the entire film serves ultimately only to prepare for the final, concluding moment, and when this moment arrives, when (to use the final phrase of Lacan's "Seminar On 'The Purloined Letter' ") "the letter arrives at its destination,"⁴ the film can end at once. The film is thus structured in a strictly "teleological" manner, all its elements point toward the final moment, the long-awaited culmination; which is why we could also use it to question the usual procedure of the deconstruction of teleology: perhaps it announces a kind of movement toward the final denouement which escapes the teleological economy as depicted (one is even tempted to say: reconstructed) in deconstructionist readings.⁵

City Lights is a story about a tramp's love for a blind girl selling flowers on a busy street who mistakes him for a rich man. Through a series of adventures with an eccentric millionaire who, when drunk, treats the tramp extremely kindly, but when sober fails even to recognize him (was it here that Brecht found the idea for his *Puntilla and his*

Servant Matti?), the tramp gets his hands on the money needed for an operation to restore the poor girl's sight; whereupon he is arrested for theft and sentenced to prison. After he has done his time, he wanders around the city, alone and desolate; suddenly, he comes across a florist's shop where he sees the girl. The operation was successful and she now runs a thriving business, but still awaits the Prince Charming of her dreams, whose chivalrous gift enabled her sight to be restored. Every time a handsome young customer enters her shop, she is filled with hope; and time and again disappointed on hearing the voice. The tramp immediately recognizes her, whereas she doesn't recognize him, because all she knows of him is his voice and the touch of his hand: all she sees through the window (separating them like a screen) is the ridiculous figure of a tramp, a social outcast. Upon seeing him lose his rose (a souvenir of her), she nevertheless takes pity on him, his passionate and desperate gaze stirs her compassion; so, not knowing who or what awaits her, still in a cheerful and ironic mood (she comments to her mother in the store: "I've made a conquest!"), she steps out on the pavement, gives him a new rose and presses a coin into his hand. At this precise moment, as their hands meet, she finally recognizes him by his touch. She is immediately sobered and asks him: "You?" The tramp nods and, pointing to her eyes, asks her: "You can see now?" The girl answers: "Yes, I can see now"; the film then cuts to a medium close-up of the tramp, his eyes filled with dread and hope, smiling shyly, uncertain what the girl's reaction will be, satisfied and at the same time insecure at being so totally exposed to her—and this is the end of the movie.

On the most elementary level, the poetic effect of this scene is based on the double meaning of the final exchange: "I can see now" refers to the restored physical sight as well as to the fact that the girl sees now her Prince Charming for what he really is, a miserable tramp.⁶ This second meaning sets us at the very heart of the Lacanian problem: it concerns the relation between symbolic identification and the leftover, the remainder, the object-excrement that escapes it. We could say that the film stages what Lacan, in his *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, calls "separation," namely the separation between I and a, between the Ego Ideal, the subject's symbolic identification, and the object: the falling out, the segregation of the object from the symbolic order.⁷

As Michel Chion pointed out in his brilliant interpretation of *City Lights*,⁸ the fundamental feature of the figure of the tramp is his interposition: he is always interposed between a gaze and its “proper” object, fixating upon himself a gaze destined for another, ideal point or object—a stain which disturbs “direct” communication between the gaze and its “proper” object, leading the straight gaze astray, changing it into a kind of squint. Chaplin’s comic strategy consists in variations of this fundamental motif: the tramp accidentally occupies a place which is not his own, which is not destined for him—he is mistaken for a rich man or for a distinguished guest; on the run from his pursuers, he finds himself on a stage, all of a sudden the center of the attention of numerous gazes . . . In Chaplin’s films, we even find a kind of wild theory of the origins of comedy from the blindness of the audience, i.e., from such a split caused by the mistaken gaze: in *The Circus*, for example, the tramp, on the run from the police, finds himself on a rope at the top of the circus tent; he starts to gesticulate wildly, trying to keep his balance, while the audience laughs and applauds, mistaking his desperate struggle for survival for a comedian’s virtuosity—the origin of comedy is to be sought precisely in such cruel blindness, unawareness of the tragic reality of a situation.⁹

In the very first scene of *City Lights*, the tramp assumes such a role of stain in the picture: in front of a large audience, the mayor of the city unveils a new monument; when he pulls off the white cover, the surprised audience discovers the tramp, sleeping calmly in the lap of the gigantic statue; awakened by the noise, aware that he is the unexpected focus of attention of thousands of eyes, the tramp attempts to descend the statue as quickly as possible, his bumbling efforts triggering bursts of laughter . . . The tramp is thus an object of a gaze aimed at something or somebody else: he is mistaken for somebody else and accepted as such, or else—as soon as the audience becomes aware of the mistake—he turns into a disturbing stain one tries to get rid of as quickly as possible. His basic aspiration (which serves as a clue also for the final scene of *City Lights*) is thus finally to be accepted as “himself,” not as another’s substitute—and, as we shall see, the moment when the tramp exposes himself to the gaze of the other, offering himself without any support in ideal identification, reduced to his bare existence of objectal remainder, is far more ambiguous and risky than it may appear.

The accident in *City Lights* that triggers the mistaken identification occurs shortly after the beginning. Running from the police, the tramp crosses the street by passing through cars that are blocking it in a traffic jam; when he steps out of the last car and slams its rear door, the girl automatically associates this sound—the slam—with him; this and the rich payment—his last coins—that the tramp gives to her for a rose, generate in her the image of a benevolent and rich owner of a luxury car. Here, a homology with the no-less-famous initial misunderstanding in Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* offers itself automatically, i.e., the scene where, because of a contingent coincidence, Roger O. Thornhill is mistakenly identified as the mysterious American agent George Kaplan (he makes a gesture toward the hotel clerk exactly as the clerk enters the saloon and cries out: "Phone call for Mr. Kaplan!"): here also, the subject accidentally finds himself occupying a certain place in the symbolic network. However, the parallel goes even further: as is well known, the basic paradox of the plot in *North by Northwest* is that Thornhill is not simply mistaken for another person; he is mistaken for *somebody who doesn't exist at all*, for a fictitious agent concocted by the CIA to divert attention from its real agent; in other words, Thornhill finds himself occupying, filling out, a certain empty place in the structure. And this was also the problem which caused so many delays when Chaplin was shooting the scene of the mistaken identification: the shooting dragged on for months and months. The result didn't satisfy Chaplin's demands as long as Chaplin insisted on depicting the rich man for whom the tramp is mistaken as a "real person," as another subject in the film's diegetic reality; the solution came about when Chaplin realized, in a sudden insight, that the rich man didn't have to exist at all, that it was enough for him to be the poor girl's fantasy formation, i.e., that in reality, one person (the tramp) was enough. This is also one of the elementary insights of psychoanalysis. In the network of intersubjective relations, every one of us is identified with, pinned down to, a certain fantasy place in the other's symbolic structure. Psychoanalysis sustains here the exact opposite of the usual, commonsense opinion according to which fantasy figures are nothing but distorted, combined, or otherwise concocted figures of their "real" models, of people of flesh and blood that we've met in our experience. We can relate to these "people of flesh and blood" only insofar as we are able to identify

them with a certain place in our symbolic fantasy space, or, to put it in a more pathetic way, only insofar as they fill out a place preestablished in our dream—we fall in love with a woman insofar as her features coincide with our fantasy figure of a Woman, the “real father” is a miserable individual obliged to sustain the burden of the Name of the Father, never fully adequate to his symbolic mandate, and so forth.¹⁰

The function of the tramp is thus literally that of an intercessor, middleman, purveyor: a kind of go-between, love messenger, intermediary between himself (i.e., his own ideal figure: the fantasy figure of the rich Prince Charming in the girl’s imagination) and the girl. Or, insofar as this rich man is ironically embodied in the eccentric millionaire, the tramp mediates between him and the girl—his function is ultimately to transfer the money from the millionaire to the girl (which is why it is necessary, from the point of view of the structure, that the millionaire and the girl never meet). As Chion showed, this intermediary function of the tramp can be detected through the metaphorical interconnection between two consecutive scenes which have nothing in common on the diegetic level. The first takes place in the restaurant where the tramp is treated by the millionaire: he eats spaghetti in his own way, and when a coil of confetti falls on his plate, he mistakes it for spaghetti and swallows it continuously, rising up, standing on his toes (the confetti hangs from the ceiling like a kind of heavenly manna), until the millionaire cuts it off; an elementary Oedipal scenario is thus staged—the confetti band is a metaphorical umbilical cord linking the tramp to the maternal body, and the millionaire acts as a substitute father, cutting his links with the mother. In the next scene, we see the tramp at the girl’s place, where she asks him to hold the wool for her to coil into a ball; in her blindness, she accidentally grabs the tip of his woollen underwear which projects from his jacket and starts to unfold it by pulling the thread and rolling it up. The connection between the two scenes is thus clear: what he received from the millionaire, the swallowed food, the endless spaghetti band, he now secrets from his belly and gives to the girl.

And—herein consists our thesis—for that reason, in *City Lights*, the letter twice arrives at its destination, or, to put it another way, the postman rings twice: first, when the tramp succeeds in handing over to the girl the rich man’s money, i.e., when he successfully accomplishes

his mission as the go-between; and second, when the girl recognizes in his ridiculous figure the benefactor who rendered possible her operation. The letter definitely arrives at its destination when we are no longer able to legitimize ourselves as mere mediators, purveyors of the messages of the big Other, when we cease to fill out the place of the Ego Ideal in the other's fantasy space, when a separation is achieved between the point of ideal identification and the massive weight of our presence outside symbolic representation, when we cease to act like placeholders of the Ideal for the other's gaze—in short, when the other is confronted with the remainder left over after we have lost our symbolic support. The letter arrives at its destination when we are no longer “fillers” of the empty places in another's fantasy structure, i.e., when the other finally “opens his eyes” and realizes that the real letter is not the message we are supposed to carry but our being itself, the object in us that resists symbolization. And it is precisely this separation that takes place in the final scene of *City Lights*.

The separation

Up to the end of the film, the tramp is confined to the role of mediator, circulating between the two figures who, put together, would form an ideal couple (the rich man and the poor girl) and thus enabling communication between them but at the same time being an obstacle to their immediate communication, the stain preventing their immediate contact, the intruder who is never in his own place. With the final scene, however, this game is over: the tramp finally exposes himself in his presence, here he is, representing nothing, holding the place of nobody, we must accept him or refuse him. And the genius of Chaplin is attested by the fact that he decided to end the movie in such a brusque, unexpected way, at the very moment of the tramp's exposure: the film does not answer the question “Will the girl accept him or not?”—The idea that she will and that the two of them will live happily ever after has no foundation whatsoever in the film. That is to say, for the usual happy ending, we would need an additional countershot to that of the tramp looking with hope and tremor at the girl: a shot of the girl returning a sign of acceptance, for example, and then, perhaps, a shot of the two of them embracing. We find nothing of the sort in the

film: it is over at the moment of absolute uncertainty and openness when the girl—and, together with her, we the spectators—is confronted directly with the question of the “love for her neighbor”. Is this ridiculous, clumsy creature whose massive presence strikes us all of a sudden with an almost unbearable proximity really worthy of her love? Will she be able to accept, to take upon herself this social outcast that she has got in answer to her ardent desire? And—as was pointed out by William Rothman¹¹—the same question has to be asked also in the opposite direction: not only “is there a place in her dreams for this ragged creature?” but also “is there still a place in his dreams for her, who is now a normal, healthy girl running a successful business?”—in other words, didn’t the tramp feel such a compassionate love for her precisely because she was blind, poor, and utterly helpless, needing his protective care? Will he still be prepared to accept her now when she has every reason to patronize him? When in his *L’éthique de la psychanalyse*,¹² Lacan emphasizes Freud’s restraint toward the Christian “love for one’s neighbor,” he has in mind precisely such embarrassing dilemmas: it is easy to love the idealized figure of a poor, helpless neighbor, the starving African or Indian, for example; in other words, it is easy to love one’s neighbor as long as he stays far enough from us, as long as there is a proper distance separating us. The problem arises at the moment when he comes too near us, when we start to feel his suffocating proximity—at this moment when the neighbor exposes himself to us too much, love can suddenly turn into hatred.¹³

City Lights ends at the very moment of this absolute undecidability when, confronted with the other’s proximity as an object, we are forced to answer the question “Is he worthy of our love?” or, to use the Lacanian formulation, “Is there in him something more than himself, *objet petit a*, a hidden treasure?” We can see here how far we are, at this moment when “the letter arrives at its destination,” from the usual notion of teleology: far from realizing a predestined telos, this moment marks the intrusion of a radical openness in which every ideal support of our existence is suspended. This moment is the moment of death and sublimation: when the subject’s presence is exposed outside the symbolic support, he “dies” as a member of the symbolic community, his being is no longer determined by a place in the symbolic network, it materializes the pure Nothingness of the hole, the void in the Other

(the symbolic order), the void designated, in Lacan, by the German word *das Ding*, the Thing, the pure substance of enjoyment resisting symbolization. The Lacanian definition of the sublime object is precisely “an object elevated to the dignity of the Thing.”¹⁴

When the letter arrives at its destination, the stain spoiling the picture is not abolished, effaced: what we are forced to grasp is, on the contrary, the fact that the real “message,” the real letter awaiting us is the stain itself. We should perhaps reread Lacan’s “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter’ ” from this aspect: is not the letter itself ultimately such a stain—not a signifier but rather an object resisting symbolization, a surplus, a material leftover circulating among the subjects and staining its momentary possessor?

Now, to conclude, we can return to the introductory scene of *City Lights* where the tramp figures as the spot disturbing the picture, as a kind of blot on the white marble surface of the statue: in the Lacanian perspective, the subject is strictly correlative to this stain on the picture. The only proof we have that the picture we are looking at is subjectified is not meaningful signs in it but rather the presence of some meaningless stain disturbing its harmony. Let us recall what is a kind of counterpart to the first scene of *City Lights*, the final scene of Chaplin’s *Limelight*, another scene in which Chaplin’s body is covered by a white cloth. This scene is unique insofar as it marks the point at which Chaplin and Hitchcock, two authors whose artistic universes appear wholly incompatible at the level of both form and content, finally meet. That is to say, it seems as if Chaplin in *Limelight* finally discovered the Hitchcockian tracking shot: the very first shot of the film is a long tracking shot progressing from the establishing shot of an idyllic London street to a closed apartment door which leaks deadly gas (signaling the attempted suicide of the young girl who lives in the apartment), whereas the last scene of the film contains a magnificent backward tracking shot from the close-up of the dead clown Calvero behind the stage to the establishing shot of the entire stage where the same young girl, now a successful ballerina and his great love, is performing. Just before this scene, the dying Calvero expresses to the attending doctor his desire to see his love dancing; the doctor taps him gently on the shoulders and comforts him: “You shall see her!” Thereupon Calvero dies, his body is covered by a white sheet, and the

camera withdraws so that it embraces the dancing girl on the stage, while Calvero is reduced to a tiny, barely visible white stain in the background. What is here of special significance is the way the ballerina enters the frame: from behind the camera, like the birds in the famous “God’s-view” shot of Bodega Bay in Hitchcock’s *Birds*—yet another white stain which materializes out of the mysterious intermediate space separating the spectator from the diegetic reality on the screen . . . We encounter here the function of the gaze *qua* object-stain at its purest: the doctor’s forecast is fulfilled, precisely insofar as he is dead, i.e., insofar as he cannot *see* her anymore, Calvero *looks at her*. For that reason, the logic of this backward tracking shot is thoroughly Hitchcockian: by way of it, a piece of reality is transformed into an amorphous stain (a white blot in the background), yet a stain around which the entire field of vision turns, a stain which “smears over” the entire field (as in the backward tracking shot in *Frenzy*)—the ballerina is dancing for it, for that stain.¹⁵

1.2 IMAGINARY, SYMBOLIC, REAL

So why *does* the letter always arrive at its destination? Why could it not—sometimes, at least—also fail to reach it?¹⁶ Far from attesting to a refined theoretical sensitivity, this Derridean reaction to the famous closing statement of Lacan’s “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter’ ”¹⁷ rather exhibits what we could call a primordial response of common sense: what if a letter does not reach its destination? Isn’t it always possible for a letter to go astray?¹⁸ If, however, the Lacanian theory insists categorically that a letter *does* always arrive at its destination, it is not because of an unshakable belief in teleology, in the power of a message to reach its preordained goal: Lacan’s exposition of the way a letter arrives at its destination *lays bare the very mechanism of teleological illusion*. In other words, the very reproach that “a letter can also miss its destination” misses its own destination: it misreads the Lacanian thesis, reducing it to the traditional teleological circular movement, i.e., to what is precisely called in question and subverted by Lacan. A letter always arrives at its destination—especially when we have the limit case of a letter without addressee, of what is called in German *Flaschenpost*, a message in a bottle thrown into the sea from an island after shipwreck.

This case displays at its purest and clearest how a letter reaches its true destination the moment it is delivered, thrown into the water—its true addressee is namely not the empirical other which may receive it or not, but the big Other, the symbolic order itself, which receives it the moment the letter is put into circulation, i.e., the moment the sender “externalizes” his message, delivers it to the Other, the moment the Other takes cognizance of the letter and thus disburdens the sender of responsibility for it.¹⁹ How, then, specifically, does a letter arrive at its destination? How should we conceive this thesis of Lacan which usually serves as the crowning evidence for his alleged “logocentrism”? The proposition “a letter always arrives at its destination” is far from being univocal: it offers itself to a series of possible readings²⁰ which could be ordered by means of reference to the triad Imaginary, Symbolic, Real.

Imaginary (mis)recognition

In a first approach, a letter which “always arrives at its destination” points to the logic of recognition/misrecognition (*reconnaissance/méconnaissance*) elaborated in detail by Louis Althusser and his followers (Michel Pêcheux):²¹ the logic by means of which one (mis)recognizes oneself as the addressee of ideological interpellation. This illusion constitutive of the ideological order could be succinctly rendered by paraphrasing a formula of Barbara Johnson:²² “A letter always arrives at its destination *since its destination is wherever it arrives*.” Its underlying mechanism was elaborated by Pêcheux apropos of jokes of the type: “Daddy was born in Manchester, Mummy in Bristol and I in London: strange that the three of us should have met!”²³ In short, if we look at the process backward, from its (contingent) result, the fact that “events took precisely this turn” couldn’t but appear as uncanny, concealing some fateful meaning—as if some mysterious hand had taken care that “the letter arrived at its destination,” i.e., that my father and my mother met . . . What we have here is, however, more than a shallow joke, as is attested by contemporary physics, where we encounter precisely the same mechanism under the name of the “anthropocentric principle”: life emerged on Earth due to numerous contingencies which created the appropriate conditions (if, for example, in Earth’s primeval time

the composition of soil and air had differed by a small percentage, no life would have been possible); so, when physicists endeavor to reconstruct the process culminating in the appearance of intelligent living beings on Earth, they either presuppose that universe was created in order to render possible the formation of intelligent beings (the “strong,” overtly teleological anthropocentric principle) or accept a “circular” methodological rule requiring us to always posit such hypotheses about the primeval state of universe as to enable us to deduce its further development toward the conditions for the emergence of life (the “weak” version).

The same logic is also at work in the well-known accident from the *Arabian Nights*: the hero, lost in the desert, quite by chance enters a cave; there he finds three old wise men, awoken by his entry, who say to him: “Finally, you have arrived! We have been waiting for you for the last three hundred years,” as if, behind the contingencies of his life, there was a hidden hand of fate which directed him toward the cave in the desert. This illusion is produced by a kind of “short circuit” between a place in the symbolic network and the contingent element which occupies it: *whosoever* finds himself at this place is the addressee since the addressee is not defined by his positive qualities but by the very contingent fact of finding himself at this place. Although the religious idea of *predestination* seems to be the very exemplar of the delusive “short circuit”, it simultaneously intimates a foreboding of radical contingency: if God has decided in advance who will be saved and who will be damned, then my salvation or perdition do not depend on my determinate qualities and acts but on the place in which—independently of my qualities, that is to say: *totally by chance, in so far as I’m concerned*—I find myself within the network of God’s plan. This contingency manifests itself in a paradoxical inversion: I’m not damned because I act sinfully, trespassing His Commandments, I act sinfully because I’m damned . . . So, we can easily imagine God easing His mind when some big sinner commits his crime: “Finally, you did it! I have been waiting for it for the whole of your miserable life!” And to convince oneself of how this problematic bears on psychoanalysis, one has only to remember the crucial role of contingent encounters in triggering a traumatic crackup of our psychic balance: overhearing a passing remark by a friend, witnessing a small unpleasant scene, and so

forth, can awaken long-forgotten memories and shatter our daily life—as Lacan put it, the unconscious trauma repeats itself by means of some small, contingent bit of reality. “Fate” in psychoanalysis always asserts itself through such contingent encounters, giving rise to the question: “What if I had missed that remark? What if I had taken another route and avoided that scene?” Such questioning is, of course, deceitful since “a letter always arrives at its destination”: it waits for its moment with patience—if not this, then another contingent little bit of reality will sooner or later find itself at this place that awaits it and fire off the trauma. This is, ultimately, what Lacan called “the arbitrariness of the signifier.”²⁴

To refer to the terms of speech-act theory, the illusion proper to the process of interpellation consists in the overlooking of its *performative* dimension: when I recognize myself as the addressee of the call of the ideological big Other (Nation, Democracy, Party, God, and so forth), when this call “arrives at its destination” in me, I automatically misrecognize that it is this very act of recognition which makes me what I have recognized myself as—I don’t recognize myself in it because I’m its addressee, I become its addressee the moment I recognize myself in it. This is the reason why a letter always reaches its addressee: because one becomes its addressee when one is reached. The Derridean reproach that a letter can also miss its addressee is therefore simply beside the point: it makes sense only insofar as I presuppose that I can be its addressee *before* the letter reaches me—in other words, it presupposes the traditional teleological trajectory with a preordained goal. Translated into the terms of the joke about my father from Manchester, my mother from Bristol, and me from London, the Derridean proposition that a letter can also go astray and miss its destination discloses a typical obsessionnal apprehension of what would happen if my father and mother had not come across each other—all would have gone wrong, I would not exist . . . So, far from implying any kind of teleological circle, “a letter always arrives at its destination” exposes the very mechanism which brings about the amazement of “Why me? Why was I chosen?” and thus sets in motion the search for a hidden fate that regulates my path.

Symbolic circuit I: "There is no metalanguage"

On a symbolic level, "a letter always arrives at its destination" condenses an entire chain (a "family" in the Wittgensteinian sense) of propositions: "the sender always receives from the receiver his own message in reverse form," "the repressed always returns," "the frame itself is always being framed by part of its content," "we cannot escape the symbolic debt, it always has to be settled," which are all ultimately variations on the same basic premise that "there is no metalanguage." So let us begin by explaining the impossibility of metalanguage apropos of the Hegelian figure of the "Beautiful Soul," deploring the wicked ways of the world from the position of an innocent, impassive victim. The "Beautiful Soul" pretends to speak a pure metalanguage, exempted from the corruption of the world, thereby concealing the way its own moans and groans *partake* actively in the corruption it denounces. In his "Intervention on Transference,"²⁵ Lacan relies on the dialectic of the "Beautiful Soul" to designate the falsity of the hysterical subjective position: "Dora," Freud's famous analysand, complains of being reduced to a pure object in a play of intersubjective exchanges (her father is allegedly offering her to Mister K. as if in compensation for his own flirtation with Miss K.), i.e., she presents this exchange as an objective state of things in the face of which she is utterly helpless; Freud's answer is that the function of this stance of passive victimization by cruel circumstances is just to conceal her complicity and collusion—the square of intersubjective exchanges can only sustain itself insofar as Dora *assumes* actively her role of victim, of an object of exchange, in other words, insofar as she finds libidinal satisfaction in it, insofar as this very renunciation procures for her a kind of perverse surplus enjoyment. A hysteric continually complains of how he cannot adapt himself to the reality of cruel manipulation, and the psychoanalytic answer to it is not "give up your empty dreams, life is cruel, accept it as it is" but quite the contrary "your moans and groans are false since, by means of them, you are *only too well adapted* to the reality of manipulation and exploitation:" by playing the role of helpless victim, the hysteric assumes the subjective position which enables him to "blackmail emotionally his environs," as we would put it in today's jargon.²⁶

This answer, in which the “Beautiful Soul” is confronted with how it actually partakes of the wicked ways of the world, closes the circuit of communication: in it, the subject/sender receives from the addressee his own message in its true form, i.e., the true meaning of his moans and groans. In other words, in it, the letter that the subject put into circulation “arrives at its destination,” which was from the very beginning the sender himself: the letter arrives at its destination when the subject is finally forced to assume the true consequences of his activity. This is how Lacan, in the early 1950s, interpreted the Hegelian dictum about the rationality of the real (“What is rational is actual and what is actual is rational”):²⁷ the true meaning of the subject’s words or deeds—their *reason*—is disclosed by their actual consequences, so the subject has no right to shrink back from them and say “But I didn’t mean it!” In this sense, we may say that Hitchcock’s *Rope* is an inherently Hegelian film: the homosexual couple strangles their best friend to win recognition from professor Caddell, their teacher who preaches the right of Supermen to dispose of the useless and weak; when Caddell is confronted with the verbatim realization of his doctrine—when, in other words, he gets back from the other his own message in its inverted, true form, i.e., when the true dimension of his own “letter” (teaching) reaches its proper addressee, namely himself—he is shaken and shrinks back from the consequence of his words, unprepared to recognize in them his own truth. Lacan defines “hero” as the subject who (unlike Caddell and like Oedipus, for example) fully assumes the consequences of his act, that is to say, who does not step aside when the arrow that he shot makes its full circle and flies back at him—unlike the rest of us who endeavor to realize our desire without paying the price for it: revolutionaries who want Revolution without revolution (its bloody reverse). Hitchcock’s benevolent-sadistic playing with the spectator takes into account precisely this halfway nature of our desiring: he makes the spectator shrink back by confronting him with the full consequence of the realization of his desire (“you want this evil person killed? OK, you will have it—with all the nauseating details you wanted to pass over in silence . . .”). In short, Hitchcock’s “sadism” corresponds exactly to the superego’s “malevolent neutrality:” he is nothing but a neutral “purveyor of truth,” giving us only what we wanted, but including in the package the part of it that we prefer to ignore.

This reverse of the subject's message is its *repressed*; so it is not difficult to see how the impossibility of metalanguage is linked to the return of the repressed. "There is no metalanguage" insofar as the speaking subject is always already spoken, i.e., insofar as he cannot master the effects of what he is saying: he always says more than he "intended to say," and this surplus of what is effectively said over the intended meaning puts into words the repressed content—in it, "the repressed returns."²⁸ What are symptoms *qua* "returns of the repressed" if not such slips of the tongue by means of which "the letter arrives at its destination," i.e., by means of which the big Other returns to the subject his own message in its true form? If, instead of saying "Thereby I proclaim the session open," I say "Thereby I proclaim the session closed," do I not get, in the most literal sense, my own message back in its true, inverted form? So what could, at this level, the Derridean notion that a letter can also miss its destination mean? That the repressed can also *not* return—yet by claiming this, we entangle ourselves in a naive substantialist notion of the unconscious as a positive entity ontologically preceding its "returns," i.e., symptoms *qua* compromise formations, a notion competently called in question by Derrida himself.²⁹ Here, we cannot but repeat after Lacan: there is no repression previous to the return of the repressed; the repressed content does not precede its return in symptoms, there is no way to conceive it in its purity undistorted by "compromises" that characterize the formation of the symptoms.³⁰

This brings us to the third variation, that of the frame always being framed by part of its content; this formula³¹ is crucial insofar as it enables us to oppose the "logic of the signifier" to hermeneutics. The aim of the hermeneutical endeavor is to render visible the contours of a "frame," a "horizon" that, precisely by staying invisible, by eluding the subject's grasp, in advance determines its field of vision: what we can see, as well as what we cannot see, is always given to us through a historically mediated frame of preconcepts. There is of course nothing pejorative in the use of the term "preconceit" here: its status is transcendental, i.e., it organizes our experience into a meaningful totality. True, it involves an irreducible limitation of our vision, but this finitude is in itself ontologically constitutive: the world is open to us only within radical finitude. At this level, the impossibility of metalanguage equals the impossibility of a neutral point of view enabling us to see

things “objectively,” “impartially”: there is no view that is not framed by a historically determined horizon of “preunderstanding”. Today, for example, we can ruthlessly exploit nature only because nature itself is disclosed to us within a horizon that gives it to be seen as raw material at our disposal, in contrast to the Greek or medieval notion of nature. The Lacanian “logic of the signifier” supplements this hermeneutical thesis with an unheard-of inversion: the “horizon of meaning” is always linked, as if by a kind of umbilical cord, to a point *within* the field disclosed by it; the frame of our view is always already framed (re-marked) by a part of its content. We can easily recognize here the topology of the Möbius band where, as in a kind of abyssal inversion, the envelope itself is encased by its interior.³²

The best way to exemplify this inversion is via the dialectic of view and gaze: in what I see, in what is open to my view, there is always a point where “I see nothing,” a point which “makes no sense,” i.e., which functions as the picture’s stain—this is the point from which the very picture returns the gaze, looks back at me. “A letter arrives at its destination” precisely in this point of the picture: here I encounter myself, my own objective correlative—here I am, so to speak, inscribed in the picture; this ontic “umbilical cord” of the ontological horizon is what is unthinkable for the entire philosophical tradition, Heidegger included. Therein lies the reason of the uncanny power of psychoanalytical interpretation: the subject pursues his everyday life within its closed horizon of meaning, safe in his distance with respect to the world of objects, assured of their meaning (or their insignificance), when, all of a sudden, the psychoanalyst pinpoints some tiny detail of no significance whatsoever to the subject, a stain in which the subject “sees nothing”—a small, compulsive gesture or tic, a slip of the tongue or something of that order—and says: “You see, this detail is a knot which condenses all you had to forget so that you can swim in your everyday certainty, it enframes the very frame which confers meaning on your life, it structures the horizon within which things make sense to you; if we unknot it, you will lose the ground from under your very feet!” It is an experience not unlike that rendered in the old Oriental formula: “Thou art that!”—“Your entire fate is decided in this idiotic detail!” Or, if we keep ourselves to a more formal level of the set theory: among the elements of a given set, there is always One which

overdetermines the specific weight and color of the set as such; among the species of a genus, there is always One which overdetermines the very universality of the genus. Apropos of the relationship of different kinds of production within its articulated totality, Marx wrote:

In all forms of society there is one specific kind of production which predominates over the rest, whose relations thus assign rank and influence to the others. It is a general illumination which bathes all the other colours and modifies their particularity. It is a particular ether which determines the specific gravity of every being which has materialized within it.³³

Do not these propositions amount to the fact that the very frame of production (its totality) is always enframed by a part of its content (by one specific kind of production)?

Symbolic circuit II: Fate and repetition

The encounter with “Thou art that!” is of course experienced as an encounter with the knot which condenses one’s fate; this brings us to the last variation on the theme “a letter always arrives at its destination”: one can never escape one’s fate, or, to replace this rather obscurantist formulation with a more appropriate psychoanalytic one, the symbolic debt has to be repaid. The letter which “arrives at its destination” is also a letter of request for outstanding debts; what propels a letter on its symbolic circuit is always some outstanding debt. This dimension of fate is at work in the very formal structure of Poe’s “The Purloined Letter”: isn’t there something distinctly “fateful” in the way the self-experience of the main character in Poe’s story is determined by the simple “mechanical” shift of their positions within the intersubjective triad of the three glances (the first which sees nothing; the second which sees that the first sees nothing and deludes itself as to the secrecy of what it hides; the third which sees that the two first glances leave what should be hidden exposed to whomever would seize it)? In the way, for example, the minister’s fate is sealed not because of his personal miscalculation or oversight but because the simple shift of his position from the third to the second glance in the

repetition of the initial triad causes his structural blindness? Here, we encounter again the mechanism of imaginary (mis)recognition: the participants in the play automatically perceive their fate as something that pertains to the letter as such in its immediate materiality (“This letter is damned, whosoever comes into possession of it is brought to ruin!”)—what they misrecognize is that the “curse” is not in the letter as such but in the intersubjective network organized around it. However, to avoid repeating the played-out analysis of Poe’s story, let us address a formally similar case, the classical Bette Davis melodrama *Now, Voyager*, the story of Charlotte Vale, a frustrated spinster, the “ugly duckling” of the family, who is pushed into a nervous breakdown by her domineering mother, a rich widow.³⁴ Under the guidance of the benevolent Doctor Jacquith, she is cured to emerge as a poised and beautiful woman; following his advice, she decides to see life and takes a trip to South America. There, she has an affair with a charming married man; he is, however, unable to leave his family for her because of his daughter who is on the brink of madness, so Charlotte returns home alone. Soon afterward, she falls into depression and is hospitalized again; in the mental asylum, she encounters the daughter of her lover who immediately develops a traumatic dependence on her. Dr. Jacquith informs Charlotte that her lover’s wife died recently, so that they are now free to marry; yet he is quick to add that this marriage would be an unbearable shock for the daughter—Charlotte is her only support, the only thing standing between her and the final slip into madness. Charlotte decides to sacrifice her love and to dedicate her life to mothering the unfortunate child; when, at the end of the film, her lover asks her for her hand, she promises him just deep friendship, refusing his offer with the phrase: “Why reach for the moon, when we can have the stars?”—one of the purest and therefore most efficient nonsenses in the history of cinema.

When her lover shows to Charlotte a picture of his family, her attention is drawn to a girl sitting aside and staring sadly into the camera; this figure arouses her immediate compassion and Charlotte wants to know all about her. Why? She identifies with her because she recognizes in her her own position, that of the neglected “ugly duckling.” So when, at the film’s end, Charlotte sacrifices her love life for the poor girl’s rescue, she does not do it out of an abstract sense of duty: the

point is rather that she conceives the girl's present situation, when her very survival depends on Charlotte, as the exact repetition of her own situation years ago when she was at her mother's mercy. Therein consists the structural homology between this film and "The Purloined Letter": in the course of the story, the same intersubjective network is repeated, with the subjects shifting to different positions—in both cases, an omnipotent mother holds in her hands the daughter's fate, with the one difference that in the first scene it was an evil mother driving the daughter to madness, while in the second scene a good mother is given a chance to redeem herself by pulling the daughter from the brink. The film displays poetic *finesse* by conferring a double role on Doctor Jacquith: the same person who, in the first scene, "sets free" Charlotte, i.e., opens up to her the perspective of an unchained sexual life, appears in the second scene as the bearer of prohibition who prevents her marriage by reminding her of her debt. Here, we have the "compulsion to repeat" at its purest: Charlotte cannot afford marriage since she must honor her debt. When, finally, she seems freed from the nightmare, "fate" (the big Other) confronts her with the price of this freedom by putting her into a situation where she herself can destroy the young girl's life. If Charlotte would not sacrifice herself, she would be persecuted by the "demons of the past": her happy marital life would be spoiled forever by the memory of the unfortunate child in the asylum paying the price, a reminder of how she betrayed her own past. In other words, Charlotte does not "sacrifice herself for the other's happiness": by sacrificing herself, she honors her debt to herself. So, when she finds herself face to face with a broken girl who can be saved only by means of her sacrifice, we could again say that "a letter arrives at its destination."³⁵

Within this dimension of the outstanding debt, the role of the letter is assumed by an object that circulates among the subjects and, by its very circulation, makes out of them a closed intersubjective community. Such is the function of the Hitchcockian object: not the decried MacGuffin but the tiny "piece of the real" which keeps the story in motion by finding itself "out of place" (stolen, etc.): from the ring in *Shadow of a Doubt*, the cigarette lighter in *Strangers on a Train*, up to the child in *The Man Who Knew Too Much* who circulates between the two couples. The story ends the moment this object "arrives at its destination," i.e., returns to its rightful owner: the moment Guy gets back the lighter

(the last shot of *Strangers on a Train* where the lighter falls out of dead Bruno's unclasped hand), the moment the abducted child returns to the American couple (in *The Man Who Knew Too Much*), etc. This object embodies, gives material existence to the lack in the Other, to the constitutive inconsistency of the symbolic order: Claude Lévi-Strauss pointed out how the very fact of exchange attests a certain structural flaw, an imbalance that pertains to the Symbolic, which is why the Lacanian mathem for this object is $S(\mathcal{A})$, the signifier of the barred Other. The supreme exemplar of such an object is the ring from Richard Wagner's *Ring des Nibelungen*, this gigantic drama of the unbalanced symbolic exchange. The story opens with Alberich stealing the ring from the Rhine maidens, whereby it becomes the source of a curse for its possessors; it ends when the ring is thrown back into the Rhine to its rightful owners—the Gods, however, pay for this reestablishment of the balance with their twilight, since their very existence was founded upon an unsettled debt.

The imaginary and the symbolic dimension of “a letter always reaching its destination” are thus in their very opposition closely connected: the first is defined by the imaginary (mis)recognition (a letter arrives at its destination insofar as I recognize myself as its addressee, i.e., insofar as I find myself in it), whereas the second comprises the concealed truth that emerges in the “blind spots” and flaws of the imaginary circle. Let us just recall so-called “applied psychoanalysis,” the standard “psychoanalytic interpretation” of works of art: this procedure always “finds itself,” and the propositions on Oedipus complex, on sublimation, etc., are again and again confirmed since the search moves in an imaginary closed circle and finds only what it is already looking for—what, in a sense, it already has (the network of its theoretical preconceptions). A letter traversing the symbolic circuit “arrives at its destination” when we experience the utmost futility of this procedure, its utmost failure to touch the inherent logic of its object. The way “a letter arrives at its destination” within the symbolic circuit therefore implies the structure of a slip, of “success through failure”: it reaches us unbeknownst to us. In Agatha Christie's *Why Didn't They Ask Evans?*, the young hero and his girl friend find a mortally wounded man on the links who, seconds before his death, raises his head and says “Why didn't they ask Evans?” They set out to investigate the murder and, long afterward, when the

dead man's mysterious phrase is completely forgotten, they concern themselves with the somewhat peculiar circumstances of the certification of a dying country gentleman's will: the relatives called as a witness a distant neighbor instead of using the servant Evans who was present in the house, so . . . "Why didn't they ask Evans?" Instantaneously, the hero and his girl friend realize that their question reproduces verbatim the phrase of the man who died on the links—therein consists the clue for his murder. What we have here is an exemplary case of how "a letter arrives at its destination": when, in a totally contingent way, it finds its proper place.

This reference to the letter and its itinerary enables us to distinguish between the two modalities of the crowd. When, apropos of his interpretation of the Freudian dream of Irma's injection, Lacan speaks of "l'immixtion des sujets," "the inmixing of subjects," of the moment when the subjects lose their individuality by being reduced to little wheels in a nonsubjective machinery (in the dream itself, the moment of this reversal is the appearance of the three professors who exculpate Freud by enumerating mutually exclusive reasons for the failure of Irma's treatment), this machine is of course synonymous with the symbolic order. This mode of the crowd is exemplarily depicted in the paintings of Pieter Brueghel from the years 1559 and 1560 (*Dutch Proverbs, Fight between Carnival and Lent, Child Games*): the subject is here "beheaded," "lost in the crowd," yet the transsubjective mechanism which regulates the process (games, proverbs, carnivals) is clearly of a symbolic nature: it can be unearthed by means of the act of interpretation. In other words, it is the signifier which runs the show—through this very confusion and blind automatism, the letter nevertheless "arrives at its destination." How? Let us recall Eric Ambler's spy novel *Passage of Arms*, the story of a poor Chinese in Malaya in the early 1950s, after the breakdown of the Communist insurgency: upon discovering a forgotten hideout of Communist arms in the jungle, he plans to sell them in order to buy an old bus and thus become a small-scale capitalist. He thereby sets in motion an unforeseen chain of events which exceed by far his original intent: the rich Chinese who buys the arms resells them to an Indonesian pro-Communist guerilla, the transaction involves an "innocent" American tourist couple, the story moves from Malaya to Bangkok, then to Sumatra, yet all this improvisatory texture

of accidental encounters brings us back to our starting point: at the end, the Chinese becomes the owner of an old, ramshackle bus, “the letter arrives at its destination,” as if some hidden “cunning of Reason” regulated the chaotic flow of events. Something not dissimilar to this is at work in the quartets and quintets of Mozart’s great operas; it suffices to mention the finale of *Le Nozze di Figaro*: the persons speak and sing over one another, there is an entire network of misapprehensions and false identifications, yet this chaos of comic encounters seems to be run by the hidden hand of a benevolent destiny which provides for the final reconciliation. An abyss separates this “immixture” from, say, the quintet in the third act of Wagner’s *Meistersinger von Nürnberg* where all the voices efface their differences and yield to the same pacifying flow—not to mention the brutal irruption of the crowd that follows Hagen’s “call to men (*Männerruf*)” in the second act of *Die Götterdämmerung*. The point here is the link between this crowd and the prelude to the opera with the sibyls no longer able to decipher the future course of events, since the cord of destiny is cut—the crowd enters the stage when history is no longer regulated by the texture of symbolic destiny, i.e., when the father’s phallic authority is broken (one should remember that, the previous evening, Siegfried broke Wotan’s spear). This crowd, the modern crowd, appeared for the first time in Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd”: the anonymous observer watches through the windowpane of a cafe (this frame that introduces the distance between “inside” and “outside” is crucial here) the turmoil of the London evening crowd and decides to follow an old man; at dawn, after long hours of walking, it becomes clear that there is nothing to discover: “It will be in vain to follow; I shall learn no more of him, nor of his deeds.” The old man is thus exposed as the “man of the crowd,” the epitome of evil, precisely insofar as he embodies something that “doesn’t allow itself to be read”—*es lässt sich nicht lesen*, as Poe himself puts it in German. This “resistance to being read” of the crowd designates of course the passage from the symbolic register to that of the Real.³⁶

The real encounter

The motif of fate has brought us to the very brink of the third level, that of the Real; here, “a letter always arrives at its destination” equals what

“meeting one’s fate” means: “we will all die.” A common pretheoretical sensitivity enables us to detect the ominous undertone that sticks to the proposition “a letter always arrives at its destination”: the only letter that nobody can evade, that sooner or later reaches us, i.e., the letter which has each of us as its infallible addressee, is death. We can say that we live only in so far as a certain letter (the letter containing our death warrant) still wanders around, looking for us. Let us recall the ill-famed “poetic” statement of the Iranian president Ali Hamnei apropos of the sentence of death pronounced on Salman Rushdie: nothing can stop its execution, the bullet is already on its way, sooner or later, it will hit its mark—such is the fate of all and each of us, the bullet with our name on it is already shot. Derrida himself emphasizes the lethal dimension of writing: every trace is condemned to its ultimate effacement. Note the fundamental ambiguity of the very word “end”: “aim” and “annihilation”—the closing of the letter’s circuit equals its consumption. The crucial point here is that the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real dimension of “a letter always arrives at its destination” are not external to each other: at the end of the imaginary as well as the symbolic itinerary, we encounter the Real. As was demonstrated by Lacan apropos of Freud’s dream of Irma’s injection, the dual mirror relationship culminates in the horrifying confrontation with the abyss of the Real, exemplified by the flesh of Irma’s throat:

the flesh one never sees, the foundation of things, the other side of the head, of the face, the secretory glands *par excellence*, the flesh from which everything exudes, at the very heart of the mystery, the flesh in as much as it is suffering, is formless, in as much as its form in itself is something which provokes anxiety.³⁷

The fascinating image of a double is therefore ultimately nothing but a mask of horror, its delusive front: when we encounter ourselves, we encounter death. The same horror emerges with the fulfillment of symbolic “destiny,” as is attested by Oedipus: when, at Colonnus, he closed the circuit and paid all his debts, he found himself reduced to a kind of soap bubble burst asunder—a scrap of the real, the leftover of a formless slime without any support in the symbolic order. Oedipus realized his destiny

to that final point which is nothing more than something strictly identical to a striking down, a tearing apart, a laceration of himself—he is no longer, no longer anything, at all. And it is at that moment that he says the phrase I evoked last time—*Am I made man in the hour when I cease to be?*³⁸

The unpaid symbolic debt is therefore in a way constitutive of our existence: our very symbolic existence is a “compromise formation,” the delaying of an encounter. In Max Ophuls’s melodrama *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, this link connecting the symbolic circuit with the encounter of the Real is perfectly exemplified. At the very beginning of the film “a letter arrives at its destination,” confronting the hero with the disavowed truth: what was for him a series of unconnected, ephemeral love affairs that he only vaguely remembered destroyed a woman’s life. He assumes responsibility for this by means of a suicidal gesture: by deciding not to escape and to attend the duel he is certain to lose.

However, as is indicated in Lacan’s above-quoted reading of the dream of Irma’s injection, the Real is not only death but also life: not only the pale, frozen, lifeless immobility but also ‘the flesh from which everything exudes,’ the life substance in its mucous palpitation. In other words, the Freudian duality of life and death drives is not a symbolic opposition but a tension, and antagonism, inherent to the presymbolic Real. As Lacan points out again and again, the very notion of life is alien to the symbolic order. And the name of this life substance that proves a traumatic shock for the symbolic universe is of course enjoyment. The ultimate variation on the theme of a letter that always arrives at its destination reads therefore: “you can never get rid of the stain of enjoyment”—the very gesture of renouncing enjoyment produces inevitably a surplus enjoyment that Lacan writes down as the “object small a.” Examples offer themselves in abundance, from the ascetic who can never be sure he does not repudiate all worldly goods because of the ostentatious and vain satisfaction procured by this very act of sacrifice, to the “sense of fulfillment” that overwhelms us when we submit to the totalitarian appeal: “Enough of decadent enjoyment! It’s time for sacrifice and renunciation!” This dialectic of enjoyment and surplus enjoyment—i.e., the fact that there is no “substantial”