

## THE ‘SIGNIFIER-IN-RELATION’, THE ‘SIGNIFIER-IN-ISOLATION’, AND THE CONCEPT OF THE ‘REAL’ IN LACAN

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In recent years, something of a ‘return to Lacan’ has been initiated by European philosophers and critical theorists, with the most influential work emanating from Slavoj Žižek and others of the Slovenian school. Much of this turn has built on Jacques-Alain Miller’s ongoing formalization of Lacan’s seminar, both in the slowly-appearing published editions and in Miller’s own seminar at the University of Paris VIII. Miller and his followers have advanced a strong claim as to the periodization of Lacan’s work, work that is categorised as progressing through three stages: first, the Lacan of the 1930s and 1940s is said to concern himself with the register of the Imaginary and the problem of the development of the ego; the Lacan of the 1950s and 1960s, by contrast, is said to be concerned primarily with the order of the Symbolic, and thus with the displacement of Imaginary identifications in the logic of the signifier. Finally, the so-called ‘late Lacan’ is said to foreground the category of the Real, as the domain of radical contingency, of the excess of *jouissance* over the Symbolic and Imaginary identifications and desires that govern the subject.

In their introduction to the influential collection *The Later Lacan*, Véronique Voruz and Bogdan Wolf outline the stakes of this periodization in clear terms. Referring to the period during and after Lacan’s 20<sup>th</sup> seminar as marking an “epistemic break”, they go on to claim that the seminar “initiates the last stage of Lacan’s lifelong formalization of psychoanalytic theory: from then on, the unconscious is seen as an apparatus of *jouissance*, and meaning—as a treatment of *jouissance*—is seen as a means of enjoyment.”<sup>1</sup> Understood in such a way, Lacan’s final seminars effect a move away from the signifier as the site of psychoanalytic interpretation in favour of the sense-less insistence of the subject’s enjoyment, even as the Symbolic and Imaginary registers continue to mark the life of the subject. Žižek expresses this progressive move from the Symbolic to the Real in far starker terms: “The Lacan of the lamella is ‘Another Lacan’, as Jacques-Alain Miller put it, a Lacan of drive not desire, of the real not the symbolic.”<sup>2</sup>

But what if the Symbolic as Lacan conceived it had always had less to do with interpretation and meaning than Voruz and Wolf concede, less to do with what they characterize as the “relation to meaning and truth”, supposedly superseded in the final seminars?<sup>3</sup> In this essay, I’ll argue that Lacan consistently foregrounded

that part of the signifier that resists meaning and that, in so doing, comes to simultaneously constitute and threaten the subject of the unconscious. Such a simultaneous logic of formation and deformation, I will argue, is characteristic of Lacan's Real; as such, from early in his teaching, Lacan can be said to have been concerned with the radical imbrication of the Real within the Symbolic, manifested in the aspect of the signifier that insists beyond sense.

Some of the confusion that has tended to surround Lacan's account of language might be explained as a result of the profusion of technical terms used throughout the seminar to designate the paradoxical materiality of the signifier. Terms including 'letter', 'unary trait', 'phallic signifier', 'empty signifier' and others are used, if not interchangeably, then to designate different aspects of the same phenomenon, namely the material insistence of the signifier beyond any signifiatory function. As a result, this paper effects a strategic theoretical condensation of Lacan's conceptual innovations around the materiality of the signifier through the drawing of a distinction between what I call the 'signifier-in-relation' and the 'signifier-in-isolation'. This typology aims to reduce Lacan's multifarious terms relating to language to their most pertinent, opposing characteristics: the signifier-in-relation designates the signifier as it exists negatively, defined purely by relation to other signifiers and producing meaning as the result of its perpetual displacement along the axes of metaphor and metonymy. The signifier-in-isolation designates the signifier as Real, isolated as a material element apart from the networks of relation that would render it conducive to meaning. I will explain the pertinence and genesis of this typology as my argument progresses, but for now it is worth emphasising that the signifier-in-isolation and signifier-in-relation should be considered as potential 'states' for *any* signifier, rather than as different signifiers or fundamentally different modalities of signification.

Most importantly, such a rethinking of Lacan's psychoanalytic conceptualization of language allows a broader revisioning of his relationship to the intellectual movements that defined his time. Far from being the orthodox structuralist or post-structuralist of legend, Lacan's insistence on the paradoxical materiality of the signifier in the Real—as resistant to sense as it is constitutive of it—resists any philosophical valorization of the endless play of meaning. Derrida's critique of Lacan as a tacit idealist of the signifier can, in turn, be challenged by reference to the latter's assault on the possibility of transcendence, a limitation that is insured by the material signifier's persistence beyond any stability of meaning or sense. Through readings of Lacan's theories of psychosis, an analysis of his seminar on Poe, as well as a turn to Freud's own recognition of the impasse in meaning revealed in dreams, I hope to demonstrate the constitutive centrality of the Real in the Symbolic, as revealed in the 'signifier-in-isolation'.

Before turning to the particular concepts Lacan introduces to explain the inherence of the Real to the Symbolic, I will consider psychosis as the subjective structure perhaps most revealing of the theoretical centrality of the signifier-in-isolation to both the Symbolic and the Real. In what follows, Lacan's theorization of psychosis will be elaborated as a metapsychological construct with implications for his wider theory of the subject and of language; psychosis, that is, when conceived as a particular way that the subject can be structured, reveals facets of language that have implications for the more general theory of the subject that Lacan proposed throughout his seminar. As such, the clinical material discussed will be in service to these wider, metapsychological and philosophical implications.

## LANGUAGE AND PSYCHOSIS

Lacan succinctly introduces his thesis on psychosis as follows, in the course of his third seminar:

Prior to all symbolisation—this priority is not temporal but logical—there is, as the psychoses demonstrate, a stage at which it is possible for a portion of symbolisation not to take place. This initial stage precedes the entire neurotic dialectic, which is due to the fact that neurosis is articulated speech, in so far as the repressed and the return of the repressed are one and the same thing. In can thus happen that something primordial regarding the subject's being does not enter into symbolisation and

## THE 'SIGNIFIER-IN-RELATION', THE 'SIGNIFIER-IN-ISOLATION' AND THE 'REAL'

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is not repressed, but rejected.<sup>4</sup>

If neurosis is predicated on the repression of a signifier or chain of signifiers, psychosis represents a more radical rejection or, to the use the term Lacan uses throughout his third seminar, foreclosure. That which is foreclosed is the paternal signifier, the Name-of-the-Father, the element that assures the breaking up of the Imaginary dyad in favour of the overdetermined structure of the Symbolic. If, for the non-psychotic subject, the institution of the Symbolic as the resolution of the Oedipus complex requires the paternal law, as the third term that breaks up the dyad of Imaginary identification, the psychotic has no such access to Symbolic mediation. For the neurotic, alienation in language ensures a contingent and precarious distance from the Real. For the psychotic, by contrast, even such a meagre 'protection' is unavailable.

The question remains, however, whether such a proximity to the Real for the psychotic occurs entirely *outside* the logic of the signifier, or whether it is *within* the logic of signification that we might find the Real in its relation to the psychotic; in other words, whether Lacan imposes a stark either/or on the position of the psychotic in relation to the Symbolic: outside it, or within it, and nothing in between. Must psychosis be explained as entirely outside the ambit of Symbolic logic, or is it rather just an *unmediated*, dyadically organised Symbolic logic that prevails in psychotic subjectivity? Lacan will equivocate on this, but it is my contention that the latter thesis is the more predominant, and least acknowledged, facet of Lacan's theory of language. The wager of this paper is that the account of the complex relation between language and psychosis offered by Lacan in his third seminar offers us a more general sense of how language is always-already implicated in the Real. As such, Lacan's account of the Symbolic offers us a way out of the forced choice between language as a perpetually creative domain of ever-changing signification, or as a closed, fixed totality ultimately determined by its syntax.

The alternative thesis outlined above, whereby the separation of the Real from the Symbolic is maintained by reference to the supposed rejection of the Symbolic in psychotic subjectivity, finds superficial support in an oft-cited passage from seminar three. In a discussion of Freud's case of the Wolf Man, Lacan outlines how an early hallucination described by Freud of the cutting of a finger with a knife, an episode that the Wolf Man is unable to recount in speech, illustrates the thesis that "what is refused in the symbolic order re-emerges in the real."<sup>5</sup> We are led, initially, to believe, as Lacan baldly states it, that "he [the Wolf Man] has rejected all means of access to castration [...] all access to the register of the symbolic function".<sup>6</sup> Just a few lines down, however, Lacan nuances his position, claiming that what is at stake is a "range, a series, of relations" between the Symbolic, the Real and the subject's hallucination, what Lacan "provisionally calls the subject's history in the symbolic."<sup>7</sup> Lacan goes on to indicate his hesitation and caution - "I don't know whether I shall retain this combination of terms" - before concluding that "the origin of the neurotic repressed is not situated at the same level of history in the symbolic as that of the repressed in psychosis."<sup>8</sup>

What is at stake in Lacan's cautious appraisal of the Wolf Man's hallucination is precisely the wider implication of his theory of psychosis for the general account of the interlacing of the Symbolic and the Real. We see Lacan inching towards a recognition, made more explicit elsewhere, that the Symbolic acts as the necessary background of a certain theory of signification for even those psychic processes most associated with the Real of psychic disintegration. As quoted above, Lacan needs to insist on the "history" of the subject's relation to the Symbolic as such, and we are enjoined to suppose that such a history is irrevocable, even as he distinguishes between the differing "levels" of such a history in neurotic or psychotic structures. To do otherwise would be to render his account of Oedipal development and the subsequent generalisation of the Imaginary/Symbolic relation incoherent; as Lacan had insisted at least since 1949, the Imaginary and the Symbolic are fundamentally conjoined.<sup>9</sup>

This relation between the Real of the Wolf Man's hallucination and the Symbolically-enabled Imaginary identification of the ego is made explicit by Lacan soon after the reflections quoted above. Discussing the nascent ego, Lacan remarks that "one's relationship to the ego is fundamentally ambiguous, one's assumption of the ego is always revocable. In the psychotic subject on the other hand certain elementary phenomena [...]

show us the subject completely identified with his ego, with which he speaks, or with the ego assumed entirely along instrumental lines.”<sup>10</sup> As Lacan continues, “it’s as if a third party, his [the Wolf Man’s] lining, were speaking and commenting on his activity.”<sup>11</sup>

To speak of a subject’s “lining” is to bring into question the barrier between self and other, between inside and outside. It is through the introjection of alienating images of the other that such a boundary is constructed, but it is also predicated on a minimal level of unconscious symbolic identification, even if such an identification can only be attached to pre-Oedipal, which is to say opaque, signifiers. The implication of Lacan’s argument here is that, for the psychotic, such a minimal coordination is all that can be guaranteed: with the paternal law being foreclosed, only the closed dyadic logic of the Imaginary can prevail, even as it is supported by the signifier at its most opaque and non-relational, most ‘instrumental’. For the neurotic, the dyadic logic of demand that accompanies primary narcissism is nuanced with the metonymy of desire in the signifier; desire is absent for the psychotic precisely by virtue of the lack of a full installation of the paternal law.

It is worth asking after the ‘nature’ of these non-relational elements of the Symbolic, for it is partly in Lacan’s elaboration of this most material, which is to say most insistent and non-relational, aspect of signification that he most fully departs from, and subverts, Saussure’s insistence on the inevitability of the relationship between the signifier and the signified. The signifier is, as such, *material* for Lacan even at this early stage in his teaching; as he puts it in Seminar 3, the signifier “is to be taken in the sense of the material of language.”<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, he devotes a considerable portion of his third seminar to locating the link between this new, especially material aspect of signification, allied with processes of egoic development, and the reality of psychotic structures.

Before considering some of the early concepts Lacan coined in the 1950s and 1960s to capture the isolated signifier, it is worth taking a detour through Freud’s dream theory to highlight the rigorous grounding Lacan’s linguistic materialism has in the writings of psychoanalysis’ founder.

## FREUD’S NAVEL

It is often asked the extent to which Lacan, while protesting his fidelity to Freud’s discovery of psychoanalysis, proposed a revised theory of the subject that far exceeds Freud’s intentions.<sup>13</sup> Such accounts tend to focus on Lacan’s importation of structural linguistics into Freudian theory and practise and his ‘de-biologisation’ of Freud’s account of the drives. In this section, I hope to show how, at least in part, Lacan’s insistence on the materiality of the signifier as discussed above is present as a theoretical potentiality in Freud’s account of dreams. By understanding how Freud allies unconscious signification with the breakdown of meaning, we might further refine our understanding of the persistence of Real signifiers within the Symbolic.

Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams*<sup>14</sup> is widely considered to be the text that announced the arrival of psychoanalysis as a distinct science of the mind. The fact that this text was concerned in the upmost with a particular theory of interpretation, predicated on a distinct and radically non-traditional conception of meaning, of the relation between a sign and its referent, marks it out as perhaps the single most ‘proto-Lacanian’ text in the Freudian corpus. Freud’s analyses of his own dreams and those of his analysands gifted him with the route into the unconscious that had previously been hinted at by the false promises of hypnosis and the analysis of the physiological degeneration of the brain.<sup>15</sup> Freud’s account of the ‘dreamwork’ is complex, and overarching the specific account of the logic of the dream lies a more general conception of language, decoupled from any correspondence theory of truth and defined by an insistence on the retroactive completion of meaning via second-order interpretation. Lacan will complete this logic in his insistence on the intervention of the ‘quilting point’ or *point de capiton* in a chain of signifiers, retrospectively reconstituting the meaning of a chain of signifiers in a direction that could not be anticipated at its inception<sup>16</sup>, while Freud himself would extend the logic to his theory of trauma, whereby trauma is often constituted by a deferred action that revives a previously repressed memory.<sup>17</sup> Just as *The Interpretation of Dreams* inaugurates psychoanalysis, so too does it prefigure many of the radicalisations of structural linguistics that would come in the wake of structuralism,

## THE 'SIGNIFIER-IN-RELATION', THE 'SIGNIFIER-IN-ISOLATION' AND THE 'REAL'

---

most auspiciously in Lacan's metapsychology.

As much a 'confession' or self-analysis, the text combines three essential elements: the outline of a methodology of dream interpretation that more broadly encapsulates the importance of free association in the psychoanalytic cure; a series of case studies, some drawn from Freud's own dreams and some from his patients, that show the possibilities of the methodology in action; and the first systematic elaboration of Freud's model of the mind, or what has come to be known as Freud's 'first topology', the system comprising the unconscious, the preconscious and the conscious. For our purposes, it is largely in the elaboration of Freud's method of interpretation that the broader implications relevant to Lacan's theory of signification arise, and in particular in the aporia in interpretation that arises during his discussion of his dream of Irma's injection.

Freud first outlines his dream of his patient Irma early in *The Interpretation of Dreams*.<sup>18</sup> In 1895, Freud reports, he treated a young lady who was a close friend both of himself and his family. The lady presented with symptoms of hysterical anxiety and was, Freud reports, "partially relieved of her hysterical symptoms"<sup>19</sup> through psychoanalytic treatment. Freud comments on the particular complications that attend treating a friend, noting that the "physician's personal interest is greater, but his authority less."<sup>20</sup> During the summer holidays when the treatment was put on hold, Otto Rank, Freud's younger colleague and friend, visited Irma and reported that she was 'better, but not quite well'.<sup>21</sup> Freud interprets this comment as something of a snub, noting his anger arising from what he sees as Rank's "taking sides against me to the influence of my patient's relatives".<sup>22</sup> The dream in question came to Freud that night. In it, Freud is receiving a number of guests in a great hall. Among them is Irma, who Freud takes aside and urges to continue with the treatment he has proposed. Irma complains of physical symptoms in her throat, stomach and abdomen, and submits after some resistance to an examination by Freud. Freud examines her throat and sees "a big white patch; at another place I saw extensive whitish grey scabs upon some remarkable curly structures which were evidently modelled on the turbinal bones of the nose."<sup>23</sup> Otto Rank, who is also present, is accused by Dr. M of injecting Irma with "propyl...propyls... propionic acid...trimethylamin"<sup>24</sup> with an unclean syringe, this being the cause of the infection. Freud notes that he sees the chemical formula for trimethylamin appear before him at the conclusion of the dream.

Freud's analysis of the dream rigorously delineates the wish fulfilments hiding behind the 'manifest', which is to say surface or literal, dream thoughts. Most insistently, Freud emphasises that, through the physical manifestation of an illness in Irma, his own responsibility for the patient is assuaged (as he is not blamed for having given the injection) and responsibility is transferred to Otto Rank who had previously seemed to have implicitly questioned Freud's professional judgement.<sup>25</sup> Thus, the dream acts as the fulfilment in fantasy of revenge on Rank. More generally, the dream conceals various professional doubts Freud had at the time relating to his earlier regular prescription of cocaine. Intriguingly, however, Freud takes care to insist that his interpretation of the dream, resting as it does largely on obvious extrapolations from conscious concerns, cannot be seen as an *exhaustion* of its potential meaning. He could, Freud writes, "draw further information from it"<sup>26</sup>, suggesting that he won't do so so as to protect professional confidences, or the dignity of his own unconscious. We might speculate that there is something particular, and particularly meaningful, about Freud's dream of Irma; he uses the dream as a general introduction to his method of dream interpretation, to the method of treating the dream as a puzzle to be deciphered, while significantly omitting some of the more involved, unconsciously derived, forms of interpretation at work in other sections of the book.

It is only much later in the text that Freud, having alluded to the case of Irma's dream a number of times further, questions the possibility of ever exhausting the dream's signification. In a highly suggestive passage that has elicited much commentary, Freud writes:

There is often a passage in even the most thoroughly interpreted dream which has to be left obscure; this is because we become aware during the work of interpretation that at that point there is a tangle of dream-thoughts which cannot be unravelled and which moreover adds nothing to our knowledge of the content of the dream. This is the dream's navel, the spot where it reaches down into the unknown.

The dream-thoughts to which we are led by interpretation cannot, from the nature of things, have any definite endings; they are bound to branch out in every direction into the intricate network of our world of thought. It is at some point where this meshwork is particularly close that the dream-wish grows up, like a mushroom out of a mycelium.<sup>27</sup>

To fully understand the significance of this passage for our wider concern for a psychoanalytic theory of the signifier and the Real, one must restate the central division in Freudian theory between the manifest content of a dream, and its “latent” content<sup>28</sup>, which is to say the meaning revealed by following the vacillations of the surface content of a dream, revealing the unconscious meaning beneath. Lacan, in his early articles, noted the formal equivalence of this movement of substitution with the linguistic operation of metonymy, theorised by Jakobson.<sup>29</sup> For now, it is worth noting the analogous echo between Freud’s duality of the dream-signifier, split between a manifest and latent content, and what I am arguing as the dual function of the signifier more generally, split between its being in-relation and its being in-isolation.

In the passage above, Freud claims significantly that is in the “most thoroughly interpreted” of dreams that the navel, the point of impossibility, reveals itself most clearly. We can infer from this comment that this point of impossibility is not something expressive of a *lack* of interpretive possibility but, rather, the point at which the very richest of interpretations *stumbles*. We can speculate that this attachment of impossibility to even the most successful of psychoanalytic dream interpretations confers a generality, or constitutive centrality, on this obscure point of non-meaning within the broader interpretative horizon of the dream; such a thesis echoes with Lacan’s insistent interest on the signifier qua material substrate, underlying the multidimensionality of signifiatory space.

According to this comparison, the dream’s navel would seem to be the point at which a chain of dream-signifiers, defined according to the general, differential logic of the signifier-in-relation, falls into a point of opacity, or a point defined by the signifier-in-isolation, by the insistence of the signifier beyond sense. While Freud uses the word “tangle” to describe this point of analytic inscrutability, there seems to be little reason to suppose that the mere entanglement of latent dream-signifiers is a block to their interpretation. Elsewhere in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud will take great analytic pleasure in decoding the most opaque, nay ‘tangled’ of manifest dream contents. Furthermore, Freud’s brief comment above gives us little sense of precisely why, how and to what end the weave of manifest dream-signifiers might falter. We can characterise Freud’s elliptical comments here as establishing an antinomic opposition between meaning and non-meaning in the dream text, an antinomy that fails, I think, to explain why unmeaning should emerge from the web of dream signifiers. It is, I claim, only through Lacan’s insistence on the double character of the signifier, its ability to withdraw from networks of relation, that such an explanation can be advanced, but only when signification is proven to rely on the material ground of the signifier as such, in its insistence. To put it another way, Lacan’s argument constructs the signifier-in-isolation as a quasi-transcendental condition for signification as such, whereas Freud’s accounts of the dream’s navel wishes to explain away the fall into unmeaning as a mere contingency of the unconscious. I will return to this line of argument presently.

Of further interest is Freud’s ambiguous use of imagery here. Freud was renowned for the precision of his writing style, and while the above passage has a superficial clarity, a deceptive legibility, it is significantly opaque with regard to the precise status of this end-point or interregnum of dream logic. In the passage at hand, Freud’s choice of the word “meshwork” to evoke the opacity and mysteriousness of the dream’s navel seems to support our contention that what is at stake in the dream’s navel is a *density* or *materiality* of signification, analogous or perhaps equivalent to the isolated signifier defined above. Contrary to an over-abundance of signifiers signalling an end-point to meaning, we might hypothesise that it is in the Real isolation of a signifier from its ‘natural state’ of relation that subverts meaning from within.

From the very beginning of his teaching, Lacan will construct concepts intended to provide a metapsychological explanation for the aporia described by Freud in his notion of the dream’s navel. Lacan makes direct reference

## THE 'SIGNIFIER-IN-RELATION', THE 'SIGNIFIER-IN-ISOLATION' AND THE 'REAL'

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to Freud's 'navel' in the third seminar:

sense, the nature of which is to take flight, to define itself as something that flees, but which at the same time presents itself as an extremely full sense, the fleeing of which draws the subject in towards what would be the core of the delusional phenomenon, its navel. You know that Freud uses this term *navel* to designate the point at which the sense of a dream appears to culminate in a hole, a knot, beyond which it is to the core of being that the dream appears to be attached.<sup>30</sup>

The link made explicit here between the "flight" of sense and its fullness underlines the link we have already established between sense, as it is carried by the signifier-in-relation, and the non-sense of the signifier-in-isolation as sense's material ground. Further, Lacan renders clear here the importance of Freud's recognition of the "navel" of the dream, but in a fashion that underscores the constitutivity of this point of opacity, a "hole" that is related to the very "core of being"; if Freud, as I've argued, wished to associate the dream's navel with the mere contingency of the unconscious, Lacan's own theory of language situates as central the unmeaning of the signifier-in-isolation.

Lacan's reading of Poe's story 'The Purloined Letter' will initiate a series of reflections on what I am calling the signifier-in-isolation and its complex relationship with the negative constitution of meaning, recorded in the suggestive distinction Lacan makes throughout his teaching between the 'signifier' and the 'letter'. In the following section, I will highlight how consistent Lacan's insistence of the Real of the letter was, and how important to Lacan's theoretical system generally is his insistence on the materiality of language. Indeed, the general claim advanced in the remainder of this paper will be the fundamental, definitional inseparability of the Real and the Symbolic.

### LACAN'S LETTER

In an otherwise illuminating essay on Lacan's equation of the letter with the detritus of the signifier, in Luke Thurston's important collection *Re-Inventing the Symptom*, Dany Nobus claims the following: "during the mid-1950s Lacan put the letter on a par with the signifier, the two units circulating strictly within the register of the Symbolic."<sup>31</sup> In the remainder of this essay, I hope to demonstrate the incompatibility of this claim with Lacan's wider philosophy of language. By introducing the 'letter' as a concept *distinct* from the signifier in 1950s, Lacan goes some way towards affirming his later insistence on the implication of the signifier, or an *aspect* of the signifier, in the *Real*, finally articulated through his revision of the symptom as the indissoluble point or absent centre of the subject in his 23<sup>rd</sup> Seminar. To the extent that Lacan's slogan "the signifier represents the subject for another signifier"<sup>32</sup> also seems, on first reading, to suggest the signifier as the transcendental or quasi-transcendental condition of subjectivity, no matter how decentred, it is perhaps unsurprising that both Jacques Derrida and his students Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe have suggested that Lacan's earlier discussion of Poe reintroduces metaphysical suppositions of the signifier as an agent of presence.<sup>33</sup> In the following reading, by contrast, I hope to show how the dual functionality of the signifier allows it to operate both as the exchangeable, but never finally 'present' or temporally situated, unit of a negatively constituted and ultimately deferred meaning, and as the stubborn avatar of the Real, disrupting meaning even as it forms its very condition.

Poe's story centres on an unopened letter, stolen from the Queen by an unscrupulous Minister. The letter, it is said, contains compromising information, although the nature of this information is never revealed. The Minister has been blackmailing the victim of his theft after replacing the letter with one of no import. The amateur detective Dupin outwits the Minister by realising that, far from being elaborately hidden, the stolen letter is hidden in plain sight in the Minister's quarters. Upon deceiving the Minister with his own substitute letter, Dupin returns the original letter to the police. This brief summary of the plot of Poe's story highlights the extent to which the content of the letter, while hinted at as potentially damaging, is ultimately irrelevant to the fate of those who become embroiled in its trajectory. Rather, the letter functions as a blank, material object

whose movements enrol and place those who come into contact with it.

Lacan's opening comments suggest the direction his argument will take. He associates the "*insistence* of the signifying chain"<sup>34</sup> with repetition automatism. The Imaginary effects of signification—effects, we might suppose, that construct a general and temporary meaningfulness— "give us nothing of any consistency unless they are related to the symbolic chain that binds and orients them."<sup>35</sup>; or, in our terms, the negative construction of meaning via the signifier-in-relation is only sustainable when the linked background of the Real signifier is presupposed. In a discussion of the "power" of the letter, Lacan claims that "the letter exists as a means of power only through the final summons of the pure signifier—either by prolonging its detour, making it reach whom it may concern through an extra transit [...] or by destroying the letter."<sup>36</sup> The reference to the "final summons of the pure signifier" is not, as might be supposed, a reference to the final presencing of the signifier qua letter in the cessation of its movement, but rather a paradoxical reference to the signifier's 'death', its cancelling of that which it might have finally come to signify. Thus, the social elevation of a particular character in Poe's story as a result of the content-less letter he carries with him is "not drawn from the letter but, whether he knows it or not, from the personage it constitutes for him."<sup>37</sup>

This potential "personage"—the social role allotted a subject—would arise as a result, not of the signifier in its indivisible insistence (qua letter), but rather as a result of the purely *Imaginary* effects of the signifier's movement through time and space. Such Imaginary effects should be understood as the contingent and ultimately deceptive attachments of meaning that come to redefine the signifier as something carrying the potential, but never finally the actuality, of meaning *in itself*. In this sense at least, Derrida et. al's accusation that Lacan, in insisting on the substrate of materiality proper to the signifier, posits a transcendental formalism of the empty signifier to guarantee meaning 'in the last instance' should be reversed: far from *guaranteeing* meaning, the signifier qua letter in its material dimension *threatens* the establishment of Imaginary meaning grafted onto its material body in its distinction from the Imaginary deception inherent in the process of negative reference. Meaning, on this model, is only *temporarily* and *contingently* secured upon the break of a signifying chain, the point that sutures the 'end' of a signifying chain to its beginning, the provisionality of which gestures towards its own dissolution: "The sentence only exists as completed and its sense comes to it retroactively. [...] A signifying unit presupposes the completion of a certain circle that situates its different elements."<sup>38</sup>

That such meaning clings to the signifier is, for Lacan, not a symptom of the metaphysics of presence but, rather, a symptom of the *absence* of the possibility of such a presence. It is only, finally, by risking itself on the back of the signifier's materiality, its Real existence, that a transitory and temporary structure of meaning may arise. The materiality of the signifier, nonetheless, threatens, and ultimately dethrones, any putative transcendental of the signifying function, considered apart from what Lacan calls here the 'Imaginary' and temporary consolidation of meaning. Paradoxically then, it is only because the letter qua signifier-in-isolation *resists* through its inherent and circular self-reference being pushed into the position of a quasi-transcendental guarantor of meaning that signification can, temporarily, stabilise. In its very 'blankness', its very lack of content, Lacan's letter can support a multiplicity of meanings even as it persists as their constitutive kernel of Real unmeaning.

Lacan's equation of the letter with a notion of the material in his commentary on Poe rests on the notion that the letter, distinct from the Imaginary meaning that may attach itself to it, is, in itself, indivisible. Lacan writes: "while it is first of all the materiality of the signifier that I have emphasised, that materiality is *singular* in many ways, the first of which is not to allow of partition. Cut a letter into small pieces, and it remains the letter it is—and this in a completely different sense than *Gestalttheorie* can account for with the latent vitalism in its notion of the whole".<sup>39</sup> Lacan's emphasis on singularity is worth noting here, and it is particularly suggestive when combined with a critique of Gestalt psychology's holism. With this emphasis on singularity in mind, Lacan's theory of language evades any notion of dialectical recuperation. The implication here, namely that the indivisible letter, while acting as the ground for the Imaginary constitution of sense, is nonetheless singular and unrelated to any overarching horizon or whole, firmly places the letter—contra Nobus above—within



## THE 'SIGNIFIER-IN-RELATION', THE 'SIGNIFIER-IN-ISOLATION' AND THE 'REAL'

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the register of the Real: to the extent that the Real permits of no absence, no division, and no mediation, the ontological 'being' of the signifier, paradoxically, escapes the metonymic logic of the Symbolic.<sup>40</sup>

We've seen how, in his reading of Poe, Lacan situates his construction of the concept of the letter by emphasising its 'material' dimension. The use of the letter as a putatively separate concept is, here at least, meant to highlight the duality of the signifier. The signifier qua letter, defined as it is through its existence in the Real, is constructed by Lacan as a material unit that underlies, and threatens to undermine, the temporary epistemological sedimentation of meaning via the "Imaginary effects" of the signifier-in-relation. Such Imaginary effects ride on the back of the signifier, the materiality of which always threatens, as in Poe's letter, to withdraw from any final stabilisation or naturalisation of meaningfulness.

### UNARY TRAIT

Of all Lacan's plethora of concepts pertaining to the materiality of signification, the 'unary trait' remains perhaps the least interrogated. Much of the portions of Lacan's teaching that pertain to the concept remain unpublished in either English or French, and it is in his unpublished seminar of 1961-1962 on Identification that Lacan most fully explicates the concept. Here again, Lacan will emphasise the materiality of the signifier in its isolated state, but his theory of the 'unary trait' advances these arguments by further specifying the continuum between primary narcissism, and in particular the formation of the ego-ideal, and the accession to the Symbolic. In what follows, I'll examine the various ways in which Lacan characterises what Evans has called a "primary symbolic term"<sup>41</sup>, while questioning whether we might better understand the concept by aligning it firmly with the Real, and less with a Symbolic that may falsely imply structures of relationality that by definition cannot be said to operate with the indivisibility of the unary trait.

In some respects, the unary trait represents a refiguring of Lacan's already established theses as to the material substrate of the signifier, the Real unmeaning of the signifier's insistence. Read in this way, the unary trait can be seen as the same unit as the above discussed 'letter', except viewed from the standpoint of the dissolution of the Oedipus Complex and the subject's logical ascension to the Symbolic. That is, the unary trait conceptually highlights the aspect of the 'letter' that functions as 'proto-signifier', a kind of primitive, pre-Symbolic marker that provides an initial signifiatory ground for the establishment of the Symbolic proper and its constitution of meaning via negative reference. Viewed another way, however, the unary trait adds a further means of allying Lacan's accounts of the importance of proto-Symbolic elements in both pre-Oedipal and post-Oedipal neurotic or psychotic contexts with his more general account of Imaginary identity, as best exemplified in the 'Mirror Stage'. What this account seeks to emphasise is the persistence of the unary trait in post-Oedipal scenarios, and the theoretical necessity of this persistence and continuity for Lacan's project as a whole. If, as I've argued above, the material substrate of the signifier remains a necessity for Lacan's theory of signification as such, so too does the unary trait remain a conceptual necessity for Lacan, particularly when taken as the particular instance of the Real signifier in processes of identification.

The original source for Lacan's 'unary trait' is to be found in Freud's *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*.<sup>42</sup> There, Freud attempts to account for the minimally social character of what appear to be individual, isolated moments of identification. More specifically, in Chapter 7 of the *Group Psychology*, Freud aims to explain the relationship between love objects and the beginnings of identity, especially as such primary identifications are explicable in later manifestations of hysteria. The preliminary types outlined by Freud pertain to what Lacan would identify as the Imaginary structure of rivalry over the image of the Other; for Freud too, such moments of identification are tied to images of the Other, and they find a particularly relentless efficacy during the imbroglio of rivalry and love/hatred provoked by the Oedipal identification with the parent of the opposite sex.

In such instances, there is a formal identity of the love-object, the particular object invested with libido by the nascent subject, and the developing ego, such that the dyadic logic of self/other is internalised by the subject,

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installing the often vicious dialectic of love/hate within the ego and promoting an identificatory ambivalence and precariousness that Lacan chose to particularly underline. Freud also outlines a primary form of attachment to a specific ‘trait’ or characteristic of the Other that might arise in the place of a substantial investment in a love-object; Freud comments that such an attachment “is a partial and extremely limited one and only borrows a single trait from the person who is its object.”<sup>43</sup> Freud’s characterisation of this form of identification seems to suggest both a pre-Oedipal prominence to this variety of identificatory attachment, providing as it does a kind of minimal formal ground for later, more obviously ‘social’ forms of belonging, and a persistence in post-Oedipal forms of pathology; indeed, Freud comments that such a form of identification was present in his famous case of ‘Dora’.<sup>44</sup>

The benefits of Lacan’s formalisation of this Freudian form of identification is two fold. First, it allows what is implicit in Freud’s account—namely, the intimate link between this attachment to a ‘part’ of the Other and the beginnings of Symbolic logic—to come into full view. Second, it overcomes the Freudian ambivalence in the precise role of this concept, a role that vacillates in Freud’s account between a specifically temporal manifestation of *early* identification, and a more generalised *pathological* role in the formation of hysterical symptoms.<sup>45</sup> For Lacan, the location of the unary trait within a more general logic of the materiality of the signifier, both in its proto-Symbolic forms and its more general manifestation as a support of the signifier-in-relation, results in a theoretical generalisation of what threatens to remain a falsely isolated, underdeveloped account in Freud. Just as the proto-Symbolic elements that support the emergence of the ego-ideal persist, for Lacan, as a general support for signification, taking on a particular veracity and importance in psychotic structures as discussed above, so the unary trait persists as the specifically identificatory *aspect* of the materiality of the signifier. I’ll now turn to Lacan’s 1961-1962 seminar on Identification to further refine these difficult ideas.

Lacan’s seminar on Identification significantly revises and extends a number of Lacanian themes. In particular, Lacan addresses the relation between psychoanalytic accounts of identity and those proffered by (especially Cartesian) philosophy. The seminar also investigates the potential benefits of a psychoanalytic liaison with formal logic, significantly prefiguring the later use of logic in Lacan’s reflections on sexuation around the 20<sup>th</sup> Seminar. More generally, the seminar attempts to bridge the account of the Mirror Stage and primary narcissism and Lacan’s theory of signification, and Lacan attempts this by advancing a fragmentary but nonetheless suggestive new theory of *writing*. In the lesson of 17.1.62, Lacan comments: “at the root of the act of the word there is something, a moment at which he [the subject] is inserted into the structure of language [...] included in the idea of an original contemporaneity of writing and of language.”<sup>46</sup> Thus, the subject is birthed at the same moment that writing and language become equivalent. What might Lacan mean here?

First, we should understand ‘writing’ as pertaining to the beginnings of signification, those isolated signifiers discussed above; ‘language’, by contrast, is the relational structure of meaning that the Symbolic will eventually impose on the subject. Furthermore, the use of the word ‘writing’ suggests a minimal and constrained form of agency; the subject, to some degree, ‘chooses’ signifiers that will permit the accession to the Symbolic. Lacan continues: “the word does not create it so much as bind it [...] the genesis of the signifier at a certain level of the real which is one of its axes or roots, is no doubt for us the principle way of connoting the coming to light of effects, called effects of meaning.”<sup>47</sup> The ‘binding’ that Lacan refers to here is the beginnings of a binding of ‘writing’—proto-signification—to relational language, and the source of this ‘writing’ is to be found in the Real, as a foundation or ground to later “effects of meaning”. It is the signifier in its material aspect (its being ‘in-isolation’) that provides this written, material ground to meaning. It is worth underlining here Lacan’s unequivocal association of such signifiers with the Real, an association that gives the lie to Nobus’ and others wish to definitively separate the instance of the Symbolic from that of the Real. (see Nobus quoted above.)

There is, then, a need for a concept to bridge the primitive *writing* of the proto-Symbolic and the relationally defined structures of Symbolic language that will come to define the subject. The above discussed ‘letter’ is inadequate for Lacan’s purposes here in its very generality: the letter, qua signifier-in-isolation, is a universal aspect of signification the efficacy of which is derived precisely from its *withdrawal* from relation, and

## THE 'SIGNIFIER-IN-RELATION', THE 'SIGNIFIER-IN-ISOLATION' AND THE 'REAL'

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therefore from identity as such. The letter supports meaning and positions identity even as it persists in its own repetitious meaninglessness, in its own material resistance to Imaginary capture. A bridging concept would require, instead, the ability to form the basis of identification, in a manner less passive, and more active than the letter, more implicative of the *activity* of identity formation. Such a trait, Lacan argues, is found “at the limit of the Cartesian experience”, as a “guarantor, of the most simple structural trait, of the unique trait, absolutely depersonalised [...] not merely of subjective content, but even of all variation which goes beyond this single trait, of this trait which is one by being the single trait.”<sup>48</sup>

Lacan finds, at the limit of any putative Cartesian doubt, the persistence of a non-subjective One, a primary ‘mark’ that, while being a marker of difference as such, provides the ground for the imposition of language qua relational meaning onto the material ground of the signifier. As Lacan puts it, it is “a question of the 1”, of the “primary teacher, the one of ‘pupil X, write out a hundred lines of 1’s for me.’”<sup>49</sup> There is a minimal form of inscription at work in Lacan’s concept of the unary trait that bridges the passivity of the letter and the relational activity of the Symbolic. If the letter is, ultimately, a *passive* element in relation to the subject, placing the participants in Poe’s story without their consent, Lacan finds a certain *active* quality in the unary trait, such that the nascent subject actively *finds or marks* the trait it requires to become amenable to Symbolic logics. As Lacan writes, if the “thinking being” under consideration “remains at the level of the real in its opacity, it does not immediately follow that he emerges from some being where he is not identified.”<sup>50</sup> That is, the nascent subject, immersed in the proto-significatory melee of Imaginary identification, can find a way past the “opacity” of the real signifier via a minimal, Symbolic form of identification, if a paradoxical form that both resists and prepares the ground for the eventual submission to the relational, meaning-laden context of Symbolic being.

Thus, the materiality Lacan identifies as inherent to the signifier is similarly inherent to identification, in a sense more general than Freud implies in his ‘Group Psychology’. The logic of the materiality of the signifier requires a similarly generalisable logic of the One, albeit a One that acts as a primitive marker of being, absolutely distinct from any sense of subjective “personhood”, even as it might provide the minimal grounds for the later development of such an Imaginary sense of self. Indeed, implied in Lacan’s discussion of the unary trait is the sense that, as well as marking the birth of the subject, the unary trait marks the beginnings of the Symbolic as something both radically intertwined with the emergence of subjectivity, and radically *opaque* to that emergent subjectivity; the extent to which Lacan will insist on the indivisibility of this trait, this ‘beginning’ that will persist, can only reinforce the sense in which, for Lacan, signification is a material process of inscription quite separate from Imaginary forms of subjective intentionality.

What is especially intriguing in Lacan’s various metaphors for the active quality of the unary trait contra ‘the letter’—the metaphor of the child writing out 1’s is augmented later in the seminar via reference to ‘primitive man’ marking his hunting kills on a piece of wood—is the sense in which Lacan is conceptualising a form of *non-Imaginary*, which is to say non-egoic, intentionality, distinct both from the mirror relations of Imaginary identity and the supposedly passive construction of the subject via the Symbolic. An interstitial intentionality imposes itself here, and we might ask whether this intentionality—that of a persistent mark, or trace that in its unitary indivisibility guides the nascent subject towards identification—finds later expression in Lacan’s reconfiguration of the symptom as *sinthome*, that is in the reformulation of the ‘heart’ of the subject as Real advanced in his 23<sup>rd</sup> Seminar. I don’t have the space to lay out the singular logic of the *sinthome* here, but it is worth at least registering the strict continuity between different phases of Lacan’s theoretical work.

Elsewhere in Seminar 9, Lacan is more direct as to the specific role that the unary trait plays in his wider theoretical account of signification. In a reference to set theory, Lacan insists on the use of ‘unary’ instead of ‘single’ to account for the “extreme reduction [...] of all the opportunities for qualitative difference” that the unary trait implies.<sup>51</sup> Lacan expands on his invocation of qualitative difference by insisting on the role of the unary trait in answering the “question of defining identity by the *elimination* of qualitative differences by reducing them [...] to a simplified schema: this is supposed to be the mainspring of this recognition

characteristic of our apprehension of what is the support of the signifier, the letter.”<sup>52</sup> Thus, the unary trait must be taken as the most minimal possible expression of quantitative difference: a primitive count that lays the ground for the later elaboration of qualitative difference via the signifier-in-relation. Lacan complicates this premise by emphasising that, despite its conceptualisation of the One of an indivisible trait defined by its singularity, the unary trait also allows for difference; indeed, there is, in Lacan’s account of the unary trait, an intriguing dialectic between sameness and difference, a sense in which the pure difference of the qualitative signifier requires a quantitative ‘sameness’ or ground to persist. Lacan claims, “qualitative difference can even on occasion underline the signifying sameness. This sameness is constituted precisely by the fact that the signifier as such serves to connote difference in the pure state, and the proof is that at its first appearance the one manifestly designates multiplicity as such.”<sup>53</sup> Employing the metaphor of a hunter recording his kills with single notches on wood to illustrate his point, Lacan writes “I [the hunter] kill one of them [an animal], I kill another of them, it is a second adventure which I can distinguish by certain traits from the first, but which resembles it essentially by being marked with the same general line.”<sup>54</sup>

As such, the quantitative, singular mark or trait provides the means by which the subject can, if only minimally, begin to distinguish the qualitative Symbolic differences that will come to define her subjectivity in a post-Oedipal context. Simultaneously, this quantitative mark or trait represents an initial, pre-Symbolic intentionality that is not, finally, reducible to the closed, dyadic logic of Imaginary narcissism, and which gestures towards the complex, overdetermined forms of agency that will course through the Symbolic once it has been established. Just as the unary trait is a conceptual bridge between Imaginary forms of narcissism and Symbolic forms of identification, while not, finally, reducible to either, so this form of intentionality is defined by, but not reducible to, Imaginary forms of narcissistic identification and Symbolic constitution via the signifier-in-relation. That it is in this seminar on Identification that Lacan first makes a sustained turn to topology is not without relevance here; the ‘topological turn’ is, among other things, an attempt by Lacan to override familiar oppositions—subject/object, the material and the ideal—to formally and accurately conceptualise the unfamiliar location of this form of agency.

It is also, significantly, around this time in his teaching that Lacan began to develop more fully his concept of *objet petit a*, the object that is the result of the process of identification with the unary trait that Lacan describes in this seminar, and it is in the articulation of these two ‘turns’—to topology, and to the object-cause—that Lacan will come to consolidate and formalise much of what he had, thus far, come to group under the name of the Real.

## CONCLUSION

What I hope to have shown here is the inadmissibility of holding the concepts of the Real and the Symbolic apart; instead, Lacan makes clear that the Real signifier—the signifier-in-isolation as I’ve called it—provides a point of immanent connection and emergence between the two registers, and further provides a link back to the crucial theorization of Imaginary identification that defined Lacan’s work of the 1940s. Contrary to the persistent reading of Lacan’s work that would seek to hive off the Real to only his later seminars, Lacan was concerned from early on with the complex articulation of the Symbolic and the Real registers, especially through his account of material signifiers, an account that underlines the extent to which Lacan quickly left behind any close debt to Saussurean linguistics. While the signifier-in-relation, the signifier as it is defined in relation to other signifiers, conforms to Saussure’s account of the differential constitution of meaning, the signifier-in-isolation is established by Lacan as an insistent, senseless ground, the element that binds the Symbolic and the Real together, a binding returned to throughout Lacan’s teaching. Different aspects of the isolated signifier are defined by Lacan through the development of the ‘letter’ and the ‘unary trait’, the latter serving to explain the central role of the Real signifier in the subject’s processes of Imaginary identification. By underlining the interlacing of the Symbolic and the Real, and the ever-presence of the Imaginary, we gain a more precise sense of Lacan’s intellectual project, a project defined by conceptual redoublings and returns, and resistant to any notion of linear, teleological ‘development’.

## THE 'SIGNIFIER-IN-RELATION', THE 'SIGNIFIER-IN-ISOLATION' AND THE 'REAL'

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## NOTES

1. V. Voruz and B. Wolf (eds.), *The Later Lacan: An Introduction*, (New York: SUNY Press, 2007), x.
2. S. Žižek, 'Slavoj Žižek on David Lynch', available online: [http://www.lacan.com/thesymptom/?page\\_id=1955](http://www.lacan.com/thesymptom/?page_id=1955)
3. V. Voruz and B. Wolf (eds.), *The Later Lacan: An Introduction*, (New York: SUNY Press, 2007), x.
4. J. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book III : The Psychoses (1955-1956)*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993), 81; hereafter Lacan, *The Psychoses*
5. Lacan, *The Psychoses*, 13.
6. Lacan, *The Psychoses*, 13.
7. Lacan, *The Psychoses*, 13.
8. Lacan, *The Psychoses*, 13.
9. In his 1949 paper on the 'Mirror Stage', Lacan refers to "the symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form, prior to being objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other"; as such, this matrix—the name chosen for the child prior even to its birth, the opaque signifiers issued by parents as the child jubilantly assumes her mirror image—is the ground upon which what Lacan would come to call Imaginary identification can take place. The complex interconnection between the Imaginary and the Symbolic will later be formalized by Lacan in the figure of the Borromean knot, from the 20<sup>th</sup> seminar onwards.
10. Lacan, *The Psychoses*, 14.
11. Lacan, *The Psychoses*, 14.
12. Lacan, *The Psychoses*, 32.
13. Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen offers a useful reflection on this question in his 'The Oedipus Problem in Freud and Lacan': "Was Lacan really a Freudian? Was he faithful to Freud's heritage? He seems to suggest that precisely in his lecture "The Freudian Thing" [...] Nevertheless, everyone knows that this return [to Freud] was accomplished after some rather lengthy detours through Wallon, Hegel, Heidegger, Kojève, Saussure, and Lévi-Strauss [...] does this mean that Lacan was *not* Freudian; that, under cover of Freudianism, he constructed a completely original theory of desire? That would be a rather strict interpretation of faithfulness, the very one that Lacan's contemporaries invoked to expel him from the psychoanalytic interpretations. As Plato already remarked, parricide is the inevitable form of faithfulness." M. Borch-Jacobsen, 'The Oedipus Problem in Freud and Lacan' in *Critical Inquiry* 20.2, Winter 1994, 267-282.
14. S. Freud, S.E vols. 4 and 5.
15. See 'Making Freudian Theory' in G. Makari, *Revolution in Mind : The Creation of Psychoanalysis*, (London: Gerald Duckworth and Co., 2008), 9-81.
16. Lacan, *The Psychoses*, 268-269.
17. Freud made this observation as early as his unpublished 'Project for a Scientific Psychology' (1895): "Here we have the case of a memory arousing an affect which it did not arouse as an experience, because in the meantime the change [brought about] in puberty had made possible a different understanding of what was remembered. [...] We invariably find that a memory is repressed which has only become a trauma by a *deferred action*." (S. Freud, S.E vol. 1, p.356).
18. S. Freud, S.E vol. 4, p.106-121.
19. S. Freud, S.E vol. 4, p.106.
20. S. Freud, S.E vol. 4, p.106.
21. S. Freud, S.E vol. 4, p.106.
22. S. Freud S.E vol. 4, p.106.
23. S. Freud S.E vol. 4, p.107.
24. S. Freud S.E vol. 4, p.107.
25. S. Freud S.E vol. 4, p.118.
26. S. Freud S.E vol. 4, p.121.
27. S. Freud, S.E vol. 4, p.525.
28. The distinction between 'manifest' and 'latent' dream content would remain a constant in Freud's work, reappearing as late as 1940 in 'An Outline of Psycho-analysis'. (S. Freud, S.E vol. 23).
29. 'The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason Since Freud' in *Écrits* 425.
30. Lacan, *The Psychoses*, 260; emphasis in the original.
31. Dany Nobus, 'Illiterature', in Luke Thurston (ed.), *Re-Inventing The Symptom: Essays on the Final Lacan*, (New York,

## THE 'SIGNIFIER-IN-RELATION', THE 'SIGNIFIER-IN-ISOLATION' AND THE 'REAL'

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Other Press, 2002), p.26.

32. J. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan, (New York: Penguin, 1994), 207.

33. "[T]he signifier-letter, in the topology and the psychoanalytico-transcendental semantics with which we are dealing, has a proper place and meaning which form the condition, origin, and destination of the entire circulation, as of the entire logic of the signifier." J. Derrida, *The Postcard : From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 437. In so far as Lacan insists on the signifier's underlying materiality (qua 'letter') as the condition of the emergence of signification, Derrida is right to signal the precedence of this structuring element in Lacan's broader argument, although it is less clear the extent to which this materiality functions as 'transcendental'; rather, the letter is both the condition of sense and that which (in its very materiality) makes any final "proper place and meaning" impossible. Derrida risks idealizing here what I am calling the signifier-in-relation, and thus idealizing the endless productivity of the signifier more generally; Lacan, by contrast, is careful to appreciate both aspects of the signifier, its excessive production of meaning and its withdrawal from sense. See also P. Lacoue-Labarthe and J-L. Nancy, *The Title of the Letter : A Reading of Lacan*, (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1992).

34. 'Seminar on "The Purloined Letter"' in *Écrits* 6; emphasis in the original.

35. 'Seminar on "The Purloined Letter"' in *Écrits* 6; emphasis in the original.

36. 'Seminar on "The Purloined Letter"' in *Écrits* 23.

37. 'Seminar on "The Purloined Letter"' in *Écrits* 23.

38. Lacan, *The Psychoses*, 263.

39. 'Seminar on "The Purloined Letter"' in *Écrits* 16; emphasis in the original.

40.40 As Lacan writes in his second seminar, "there is no absence in the real." (S2, p.313).

41. D. Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, (London and New York, Verso, 1997), p.86.

42. S. Freud S.E vol. 18 p.67-145.

43. S. Freud S.E vol. 18 p.107.

44. S. Freud S.E vol. 18 p.107.

45. "We have heard that identification is the earliest and original form of emotional tie; it often happens that under the conditions in which symptoms are constructed, that is, where there is repression and where the mechanisms of the unconscious are dominant, object-choice is turned back into identification." S. Freud S.E vol. 18 p.107; Freud's reflections here find a useful supplement in Lacan's precise distinction between identification as a general stage of subject-formation, and the specific aetiology of neurotic subject positions.

46. J. Lacan, *Seminar 9—Unpublished translation by Cormac Gallagher*, lesson of 17.1.62.

47. J. Lacan, *Seminar 9—Unpublished translation by Cormac Gallagher*, lesson of 17.1.62.

48. J. Lacan, *Seminar 9—Unpublished translation by Cormac Gallagher*, lesson of 22.11.61.

49. J. Lacan, *Seminar 9—Unpublished translation by Cormac Gallagher*, lesson of 29.11.61.

50. J. Lacan, *Seminar 9—Unpublished translation by Cormac Gallagher*, lesson of 29.11.61.

51. J. Lacan, *Seminar 9—Unpublished translation by Cormac Gallagher*, lesson of 6.12.61.

52. J. Lacan, *Seminar 9—Unpublished translation by Cormac Gallagher*, lesson of 6.12.61; my emphasis.

53. J. Lacan, *Seminar 9—Unpublished translation by Cormac Gallagher*, lesson of 6.12.61.

54. J. Lacan, *Seminar 9—Unpublished translation by Cormac Gallagher*, lesson of 6.12.61.