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Hamlet, Logical Time and the Structure of Obsession

Shakespeare's play *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (1600)¹ has been discussed by celebrated critics and thinkers over the centuries, including Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. Lacan gave Seminars on this famous play in April of 1959. His remarks offer both a new reading of an old drama and an "old" reading of Lacan in relation to his own later work. But whatever time frame is in question, readers of Lacan's essay "Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*"² which appeared in English in *Yale French Studies* (Nos. 55/56) in 1977, will quickly realize that the familiar complaints of "reductionist interpretation" often leveled at those who place literature alongside psychoanalysis do not apply here. Lacan is not discussing the characters as real people. Indeed, Lacan contended that literature is about psychoanalysis, instead of the reverse. If Lacan's Seminar on *Hamlet* presents the characters "as if" they were real people, this is not because Lacan thought Hamlet was Shakespeare's "mouthpiece," or because characters are rhetorical tropes or figures who tell an allegorical truth about life. Rather, in a Lacanian context, fiction shows us how some writers use the Imaginary (identificatory) and Symbolic (language) orders to work with the Real: the domain of the sublime object whose cause every subject is.

In this context, literary language becomes a strange (*unheimlich*) use of language that treats of contradictions, paradoxes, enigmas and secrets, along with something like the fetish, that language works with and around. Put another way, much literary language tries to make visible the sublime object Lacan named the *objet a*. This same object is the metonymic cause of desire that appears retroactively (*apres-coup*) in meaning-making as a kind of flaw or disturbance in the *apparent*

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unity of grammatical language. Insofar as the "literary" works with what causes desire (or in the case of psychotic texts is the artist's effort to make a hole in language in order to create a lack in desire), there can be no question of a humanistic Lacanian "literary criticism". Lacan did not read literary texts as narratives about real people revealing their unconscious feelings, intersubjective relations and personal fantasies in a well-knit story.

His teaching takes us onto another terrain: that of structure and topology where spatialized problems such as the knight (or *der Springer*) in the game of chess; or fantasy, fiction and dream, automatically pose the problem of their own referent. Double-bind problematics or magical solutions point, in Lacan's teaching, to an unassimilated, unassimilable order in being and language that he called the Real; an order that produces object a rather than signifying chains. Although animals have an order of the Real in the sense of need or primary identifications with a species, humans, unlike other animals, are programmed by the law of the signifier to speak and to identify with a sexual "selffiction" (except in autism). Thus, even though Real effects are imprinted on body and being, these are ex-trinsic to the animal organism qua knowledge or organism per se. As a consequence, the "human" is a divided subject, divided between meaning (signifiers) and effects of the Real on being (*jouissance*). On the "being" side of what we call the "human", Lacan presented the Real as an obstacle. We bump up against it as if running into a mountain or a roadblock. Freud called entry into this unassimilated meaning, the navel of the dream. Lacan called it the phallus as a void referent; a signifier for law or limit that has no "natural" or biologically innate foundation. Rather, each subject's relationship to some knowledge *supposed* to have authority or represent law is primarily established as a correlation between biological gender and the effects on that person of particular experiences one might describe as Oedipal.

Lacan spoke of the actual blockages in language-things we call affect in life or secrets or enigmas in fiction-as knots. In 1973 Lacan said that nothing is more specular than a knot. Indeed, knots orient space, taken in this context as intuitive or geometric space.³ Put another way, while the narcissistic ego belongs to the Imaginary or specular order, knots belong to the Symbolic and the Real. And so knots can be studied as symbols structured by a writing of the Real, there where "the image sustains itself from the object"⁴ as Lacan says in *Encore*. In

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another of Lacan's related ideas, knots produce a structural aspect in the ego, one that is not specular. In "Breves Puntuaciones Acerca de la Psicosis" Lydia Gomez Musso speaks of the Imaginary Other⁵ as a structural function of the ego which allows the analyst to correct a lapsus in the knotting that shows up in an analysand's speech. In the 1970s Lacan demonstrated, in contradiction to his earlier mirror-stage theory, that the Real is actually put in place *before* the scripting of the Symbolic and Imaginary. In this purview, interpretation, literary or otherwise, will bear most significantly on the cause of desire-the *objet a*-not on the signifier. In the 1970s Lacan's picture of the signifying chain was of interlinked Borromean knots chaining around loss at the center of all things, loss that produces *objet a* at points of impasse or encounter between the Real, Symbolic and Imaginary orders (R.S.I.). Moreover, the way these orders are knotted (or not) yields a fourth order that Lacan called the Symptom or the paternal metaphor. That is, the Symptom functions in the realm of metaphor insofar as *substitutive* possibilities make language mean in the first place, as a system of referential repetitions. In the 1970s Lacan rewrote the word symptom as *sinthome* to refer to the metonymical part of the Symptom, the particularity of the *jouissance deposited* in a given subject's fictions and body.⁶

One might translate the word *jouissance* as an "enjoyment" in symptoms-repeated acts-that one loves more than oneself. By reversing the theories across the ages where humans are pictured as loving life more than all else, Lacan showed how the repeated familiarity of a person's symptoms constitutes a *seeming* stability that is not separable from what people usually call "psychic energy". He called this a core inertia that saps the vitality of individual desire in the Real, and refers itself to law or the phallic signifier in the particularity of any life story told in the Symbolic and Imaginary. In the broadest sense, a person's symptoms-Hamlet's obsessional symptoms, for example-tell the story of the particular structure that orients a given life and language in relationship to a *certain* knowledge about desire. Lacan follows Freud's argument that the unconscious does not know contradiction, to argue that desire remains indestructible throughout every being's life. But because the source and meaning of a given person's desire is usually opaque, women and men spend their lives, more or less blindly, following their desires. Some persons wrestle with their enigmatic desires through creativity, for example, by writing what has

long been called, for lack of a more precise rendering, "literature". It is not difficult to see that literary writing reveals varying structures of desire: perverse, obsessional, hysterical, psychotic. But those who study literature do not generally think of language as an artifice, elaborated for the purposes of circumventing the pain of the Real that inhabits a given author, unless one understands what Lacan learned about how language functions in the analytic clinic, and how what he learned there can tell us something new about literary art.

At the level of analytic structure, then, the literary is structured like language, or like the subject. In his preface to *Joyce avec Lacan* Jacques-Alain Miller clarifies the relationship of the signifier to the letter in a way that will help us understand the link between signifying language and the *object a*. The signifier does not contain the whole of a letter, Miller says. A letter is a message that is also an object. While a signifier is a word by which one designates a sign, insofar as it has the effect of signified, this is not all of what a sign is about, either. But because sound dissipates in speech, one can make the mistake of thinking the sign is adequate to itself, Miller continues. Yet when one writes, one knows otherwise because "a letter read remains. Will it go in the trash can? Will it be torn up, shelved in archives, shown, lost, sold, stolen? In all these cases, the fate of the letter becomes separated from the function of the signifier; the addressee of the one is not that of the other. What, then, do we call a letter as such? A sign, but which defines, not its effect as signified, but rather its nature as object" (10).

Lacan taught that what we call the human is constructed, constituted by myriad concrete details-signifiers and letters-which elaborate themselves in "drives", fantasies, desires, and in a suffering that always has the name of its structure: neurotic, psychotic or perverse. Such a minute and concrete building up of each subject of language means that both the biological organism and perception are written upon from the start of life, if not before, and are always already structured for and by meaning. That is, the "body" of meaning predates any causality of symptom one can attribute to the organism *qua* biological material.

In "Introductory Remarks Before the Screening of Television" which appeared in the last issue of this journal (*NFF*, no. 3), Jacques-Alain Miller extrapolated Lacan's third theory of the symptom to show that the subject is constructed around a kind of fetish, or the incorporated *object a* that Lacan found at the heart of value given to language, acts, and choices. Characterized by excess, this object resonates

with *jouissance* effects which enter the field of language beyond the pleasure principle (13). If one thinks of literary language as striving to make visible the enigmatic *jouissance* effects of a perplexing, paradoxical sublime object, one might well wonder why? The answer is, to avoid the Real. In Lacan's later teachings he aligned the Real with Freud's "death drive". He invented the symbol *petit a* to mark the residue or remainder left over from the Real that accounts for whatever is foreclosed from the Symbolic order of language, law, and social order, but repetitively returns anyway, causing desire that produces "enjoyment" or the negative pleasure of *jouissance*.

But in the 1950s, Lacan merely put forward his formula for the structure of fantasy in his essay on *Hamlet*. There the barred (divided) subject is suspended from unconscious signifiers, both at the level of message as potential meaning, and at the level of the *jouissance* effects attached to the *object a*: $S \diamond a$. The subject appears in the time / timing of the unconscious. This is, indeed, the time of desire. *Hamlet*, says Lacan, is the tragedy of human desire that can be located in a position of dependence upon the signifier; that is, in reference to a set of coordinates that account for the pre-suppositions of experience. But here, as in language in general, the signifier or message of the literary is ambiguous because its roots lie in unconscious desire of the Other (S). Moreover, the neurotic fantasy-in this case Hamlet's-is opaque because it either idealizes or desecrates the desired object (for example, Ophelia) through the filter of Imaginary *meconnaissance*. The Imaginary mistakes affective meaning for cause, an *essence*. To make this point, Lacan locates Hamlet's (subjective) knowledge on the side of the barred subject of fading.

The simplest possible equation of how fantasy is constituted in the first place is Lacan's placing of the mother's desire as a quotient under the signifier for the Name-of-the-Father. What Hamlet knows-albeit unconsciously-is his mother's desire, the mother *qua* primordial subject of demand. $S \diamond D$ is the Lacanian formula for drive. But beyond the Other's demand, Hamlet, as the subject in question, is driven by the desire to seek what he has lost in the Other's discourse: *l'heure*, the "hour" (time) of truth-or the *leurre* or deceiving fantasy he or she lives by-until which time "how weary, stale, flat . . . seem . . . the uses of this world" (Act 1, sc. ii, pp. 133-4). Drives aim repeatedly at some desirable object, meant to provide joy, answers, solutions. But the object aimed at is never "it". Beyond repeated strivings to circumvent the paradoxical-yet absolute-density and vacuity of the Real,

human endeavor is left to repeat itself over and over, without realizing what story is told by the "beyond" in repetition. Hamlet's "beyond the Other's demand" reveals him as neurotic, rather than psychotic or perverse. (While the psychotic serves the Other's commands, the perverse person is at the service of the Other's *jouissance*). The neurotic serves the Other's desires. The demand to which Hamlet pays heed is dominated, most particularly, by his mother's desire. What Gertrude demands of her son structures his desire as obsessional; that he stay home, be her object, her good boy, her silent witness, that he desire only her. Yet, paradoxically, he is not supposed to rival with his father or his uncle. "Tis unmanly grief" Claudius says. The obsessional male, like his hysterical sister, is *supposed* to let sleeping dogs lie in the family closet. Paradoxically, he is a victim of a kind of psychic incest-a dislocation of position in a social signifying chain-precisely because he learned too much too soon about the "enjoyment" of being the uniquely desired object of his mother, an enjoyment which goes beyond typical demonstrations of love. Hamlet's fantasy of love vacillates between his love for an other- Ophelia-that allows him to *appear* to exit from the family novel by making another person a proximate substitute; and a knowledge about sex that sees woman herself as perverse. In the place of the *object a*, Ophelia stands in as the perverse object, insofar as she gives rise to fantasies that make Hamlet stumble over desire in the path of his neurosis: the stasis of deadly letters in an Other whose power is both present and lethal.

In Lacan's context *Hamlet* is a play about mourning and the structure of obsession. But both terms-mourning and obsession-take on a different meaning when seen through a Lacanian grid, rather than through classical Freudian or object relations' theory. In *Hamlet* where mourning is a major theme, Lacan remarks that mourning is not carried out properly. Neither Polonius nor Ophelia are buried in the socially proscribed manners. Polonius is unceremoniously dragged under the stairs by his feet. Ophelia seems to receive a Christian burial despite an apparent

drowning suicide, but the priest is unhappy about arrangements. Nor was Hamlet's father properly mourned. Killed "in the blossom of [his] sin"-i.e. unawares, without time to confess, unable to settle his accounts-Hamlet's father appears as a ghost who places the knowledge that there is something askew, something "rotten in the state of Denmark" right in the center of the play, "center stage" so to speak.

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But what does mourning tell us about art or life? In "Mourning and Melancholia"⁷ Freud said that mourning takes a piece from the ego, makes a narcissistic demand. Lacan found this a partial explanation. Why should mourning take a piece from the ego? He answered that the first Real objects that fix desire are those we imbue with the mana of idealization and anxiety, thereby fetishizing them. Yet, paradoxically these are lost objects for which all subsequent identifications will compensate, covering over, veiling the fact that something is lost. These Ur-objects that Lacan named the mamella, the faeces, the urinary flow, the (imaginary) phallus, the voice, the gaze, the phoneme, the void itself,⁸ give rise to partial drives which chase objects that only *seem* to correspond to the drives. The "veiled phallus" of Lacan's Hamlet essay takes on meaning at the levels of loss and compensation, then. In human relations, we do not usually imagine that the people with whom we identify in love or hate are themselves veils or images covering over a loss intrinsic to our own systems of meaning and being. Those people come to seem real, fixed, in place, immovable, irreplaceable. They seem to anchor us. Yet when they die, or make a radical shift of position, something previously unassimilable in one's Other appears: an *object a* split off from meaning and being. The sudden appearance of an extimate object-that which seems both intimately within us and most profoundly outside-produces a weight of grief, with many affective permutations, because it reveals a permanent lack in the Symbolic order. Nothing is total or totalizable in that order except as discrete, separate and separable unities, beyond which there is loss in the Real which returns, in bits and pieces, at the rims, at the edges of body, being and meaning.

The imposition of linguistic meaning on being and body creates a structure (or ordering) of alienation that Lacan named the Other, seemingly full in its opaque absence/presence in meaning. The structure that co-joins alienation-but is prior to it in a writing of the Real-is the structure of separation, created as an order of the cut, of perceptually detachable "objects". Indeed, there can only be meaning when there is a referent prior to the word. This referent, new to epistemology, is Freud's *Vorstellungen*, Lacan's *object a*. The Ur-objects that line the human infant prior to any specularly, and cause desire are the objects from which we, as subjects of unconscious signifying chains, are suspended. These Ur-objects are not important as objects per se, but as prototypes of the heterogeneous libidinal objects we later

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find *in* desire. Yet, as such, Lacan's objectal referent seems to be nothing, to be lost, although it is a Real density that continually empties itself into language, materializing language around the body. The *object a* infers discontinuities into all our acts, all our perceptions, while still demanding interpretation of its presence as a bit of the Real that refuses to stay lost or invisible. The *object a*, thus, makes of language a *Fort! Da!* set of movements around lure objects. In a stunning paradox, Lacan teaches that language is "driven" by loss to achieve the precious encounter with "objects" humans seek in compensation for whatever is already and forever missing anyway.

On the one hand the unconscious is alienated meaning. Lacan looked to Freud's text to rename the *Repräsentanzen* that refer to the re-presentings of represented things (bodies, objects, experiences, etc.) the *représentant du représentés*. Insofar as the constantly building messages or signifiers that constitute the Other mix language with images, identifications, desires and traumatic effects, it is not surprising that the field of grammar (the Lacanian *enonce*) is pierced by unconscious or suspended re-presentations (the *énonciations*) that Lacan called signifiers. Language distorted or transformed. Given that these make meaning in their dependence (opposition and relation) one upon another, it makes sense to think of Hamlet *qua* subject as a fading subject (an *.S*) dependent on ambiguous messages that point to confusion and secrets until he learned what his task was: to avenge his father's murder. When the timing of his destiny-his desire-becomes clear as an action to be accomplished, when Hamlet has a goal, his encounter with the Real appears to give his life purpose.

Hamlet, like *Oedipus*, is a species play, a play about the power of human desire to bring tragedy and death to innocent victims. Indeed, all players-both here and in life-are, when resistant to knowledge of the unconscious, innocent victims caught in a chain of meanings and causalities none controls. Spoken by the Other's signified, they are at the mercy of the Other's desire or *jouissance*. At the level of *jouissance* effects, the subject's concern is with the *object a*. Now Lacan's point about primordial objects that line the subject is not that they are good or bad, nor reconstitutable images, but that they are irretrievably lost *qua* memorable content. Yet, they are *written (écrit)* as effects that produce consequences. So, they remain effective at a level of experience as marks of loss, making loss or mourning the Ur-experience. Insofar as *Hamlet* is a play about mourning, perhaps one could call it an Ur-drama. In mourning, *jouissance* effects return to mark meaning by

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affect, as *object a* that perforate the Symbolic and the Imaginary with the bittersweet pain of the Real. The paradoxical *raison d'être* of literature is an effort to bring to light this veiled object that, in life, catches the ordinary conscious subject unawares; or to empty the effects of its excessive presence in a life into the art object itself. The sublimity of art lies here.

In his Hamlet Seminar, Lacan talks of Ophelia as the veiled object, the phallus. Shakespeare brought something new to the Hamlet legend by placing Ophelia in the position of the one who undoes him, Lacan says. Ophelia captures Hamlet's secret by surprise, perhaps telling us that Shakespeare "knew" that Woman is that over which one stumbles in a Lacanian equation of the Real with the Woman. In Lacan's view, Ophelia reveals that Hamlet has a hang-up on his parents. She discovers that Hamlet is a man who has lost the way of his desire, who cannot love her as a suitable, available young woman. Although he loved her when she was not an actual threat to his unconscious economy of desire, he could only love her again once she was dead. Hamlet's desire is clearly to remain fixed in the confines of his childhood family novel. Such patternings of desire typically infuse the language and actions of obsessionals with this problematic: the obsessional's desire is for the impossible (the hysteric's desire is for lack). While the hysteric wants to expose the emptiness of the founding law in the Symbolic order, the obsessional wants to show repeatedly that he can recall a *jouissance* unmarked by castration, sanction, punishment, taboo: unmarked, in other words, by the father's "no."⁹ "The obsessive neurotic always repeats the initial germ of his trauma, i.e., a certain precipitancy, a fundamental lack of maturation," Lacan says in "Desire and the Interpretation . . ." (17).

This is the first factor Lacan points to in respect of Hamlet's obsessional attachment to his mother, the pseudo-blameless sinner whom he punishes at one remove via Ophelia. The second factor in Hamlet's obsession is his relation to the Father's Name where he is constantly suspended in the time of the Other, until the very end of the story (17). Hamlet's father's ghost is like a dream image or a screen memory whose presence shows an effort to re-present some secret about the murder that haunts, torments and will not die, but was in fact already known in the disassociated knowledge Lacan calls the Real. In this tragedy of delay, Hamlet's inaction in avenging his father is explained in Lacanian terms by the "one structural trait that is present throughout the play: Hamlet is always at the hour of the Other" (25). The

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same structural trait marks the Minister in Lacan's Seminar on Edgar A. Poe's "The Purloined Letter", pointing to the neurosis characteristic of his structure, the one that feminizes him.¹⁰ In other words, passivity is feminine in the sense that it refers to being caught in the Other, caught up in whatever Imaginary identification prevents action. In this sense "feminine" refers to a structural trait, not to any biological sexual identification with one's own gender. In Shakespeare's drama the whole tragedy is the movement of Hamlet towards his hour of destruction (25). But not even his own death which might seem to answer the obsessional's question-Am I alive or dead?-nor the deaths of Laertes, Claudius, and Gertrude, nor the subsequent silence of Hamlet's father's ghost, answer the larger question of what such a literary play really tells us about mourning. It takes an event such as the entrance of Fortinbras to tidy up the dead bodies and restore order to the kingdom before one hears a resonance of Lacan's reading of the "Purloined Letter". In both texts, restoration of the semblance of law and order, of unity, is at stake. In my understanding, Lacan points to Poe's story to suggest that the letter is returned to the Queen by Dupin so that the King may remain blind; the social order unaware that its ritual functions are just so many fillers to the black hole of palpable loss that pulls everything in, but only shows its face of underlying futility in things such as comic nonsense or the rage of mourning.

In Lacanian discourse theory, discourse is defined as "a social link" (*Seminaire XX*, "A Jakobson"). Yet the obsessional is not in the social discourse. He is the one who communicates with himself and himself alone, using language as a foil to keep others out so as to protect the primordial Other-the mother-a hallowed shrine of sacred *jouissance* meant only for him. Hamlet uses language-language uses him in a series of brilliant parries and thrusts. Jokes, witticisms, enigmas are all weapons aimed at others-all enemies-in an aggression where the law of hate replaces the law of love. Indeed, language becomes a substitute phallus for the obsessional; he uses it to defer desire by trying to build an Other of the Other. A fortification of words that will keep *unconscious* knowledge of desire at bay. All the while his language gives him away. It is dangerous to desire others-the possible when fidelity is to the ideal family novel. The fantasized perfectly loving mother and the father whose name is worthy. And yet this is a lie. And so Hamlet is cruel to Ophelia and others. There is no discrepancy between Samuel Johnson's view of him as cruel and Goethe's in-

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sistence that he was sensitive. The obsessional's exquisite pain lies in the fact that both things are true. His sensitivity is in view as long as his desire is not threatened by what shows up the limits of his tolerance for an illusory consistency of being: that limit is Woman.

And so Ophelia, Polonius and Laertes are the perfect substitute family for Hamlet. He can accidentally kill Polonius,-supposedly mistaking him for Claudius-when he has, indeed, left Claudius alone in prayer. He can allow Ophelia to be his innocent beloved until he can no longer bear his father's demands and his mother's sins. As he begins to view Ophelia as a whore and sinner, a guilty bearer of sinners, one who will bear children in order to subsequently harm them, Hamlet's unconscious drama is staged. She has become the veiled phallus, paradoxically obscuring and revealing a *jouissance* beyond desire that points to a pleasure in Hamlet's suffering, where the excess makes her Hamlet's fetish object: that around which he implicitly questions his own manhood. Hamlet is a Mommy's boy, deferring judgment of Gertrude's misdeeds until the Lacanian Real father-the clash of law with desire that produces *jouissance-pushes him* over the brink. The Real father is not a person, but an effect of structure which opens up Pandora's box with the impact of rituals destroyed, protective lies unveiled. *Something or* someone is revealed as the unworthy *jouissance* object that brings disorder into a family or social group. The ghost is only an Imaginary Father who destroys the fantasies that gave a seeming consistency to family life, heaping shame upon the family name, revealing a weak father to his son. In so doing, he opened the door to the Real father, the death drive; that in you that is more than you and does not wish your "good".

In his essay on Hamlet, Lacan referred to Freud's short essay "Der Untergang des Oedipus-Komplexes"¹¹ Here Freud pointed out that the point of the Oedipus Complex is not to kill the father or violate the mother. The point is, rather, that this Complex is unconscious. Lacan takes this to mean that when a subject feels a castration threat-the exposure of lack denied-from mother, father, or other, the phallus as symbol of Imaginary potency becomes split off from the biological organ it sometimes symbolizes; ceases to symbolize the social law of the Symbolic; and becomes a Real thing, an *object a* (46). Unconscious fantasy "drives" a subject toward the desired object-whose meaning as cause is opaque-where the antagonistic relation between that subject's desire and *jouissance* are worked out pathologically on an object

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that seems to be "outside" the subject. In everyday life such an Imaginary trajectory protects human beings (regular people, authors, characters) from recognizing that desiring ventures aimed at others are actually questions about an unconscious attachment to desire and *jouissance* aimed at an Other that remains silent. In *Encore* Lacan tells us that the primary partner of every subject is the Other (65). In the neuroses, actual others are only fake substitutes (bad metaphor, bad form)-the law of metaphor being the law of substitution-in the Imaginary game where little exchange occurs. Still, the attachment to the Oedipus complex (or family novel or drama of taking on identity in relation to gender) goes into decline insofar as the subject mourns the phallus (46): mourns the loss of childhood attachments to fictions about love and cherished alien desires.

Lacan read *Hamlet* to teach his interlocutors that only in accepting loss and alienation as part and parcel of who we are, and what we can hope for, can we begin to attenuate our suffering in the Imaginary (frustration) where we are subject to the law of some father (Claudius, Polonius); in the Symbolic (castration) where we appear in a blackout of the signifiers that structure us as creatures of language and desire; in the Real (privation) where we situate ourselves as symptoms of our spatial or Borromean structuring (Real, Symbolic, Imaginary) in everyday life. In this context we, as subjects, are *object a*. And we produce the very *jouissance* effects we cling to because they give the appearance of stabilizing us, naming us, anchoring us in certain libidinal objects that promise to make us "whole" and consistent. False promises. Yet, even though symptoms

are unconscious metaphors that mortify our flesh and being, their power that of the unconscious voice and gaze (the superego that Lacan called "ferocious and obscene"), they can be deciphered within the field of speech and language because they stand in for something else.

Hamlet is tragic, is intriguing, because he resembles us; and because he does not. At the level of "to be or not to be," (3.1. 56) everyone recognizes doubts, indecisions, passivity. Insofar as these words pin Hamlet down to the ground, stating the act he cannot carry out, Hamlet is a typical (Lacanian) obsessional. His good is his suffering which he embraces up to the structurally logical point of obsessional desire, choosing death in life over creative living (reconstituting desire outside the family novel). Everyday obsessives are not so dramatic as Hamlet. They are dreamers, impotents, alcoholics, grandiose narcissists. But they are not pursued by visible ghosts, nor do they kill a fa-

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ther and then his son and then an uncle after actually driving their sister mad. That is the point about art. *jouissance* effects are dramatized at the surface, as in life. By calling a story such as *Hamlet* a play or a fiction, we can deny, however, that it has anything to do with our lives. Yet, myth has the structure of fiction, Lacan said¹², and fiction has the structure of truth. Truth is what we repress (*Television*),¹³ but the Real is what we are used to.

Here we might bring Ophelia back on stage for a moment. Over the centuries critics have viewed Hamlet's treatment of this beautiful maiden as an existential, philosophical problem or question. Lacan takes us onto his terrain where there is no meta-language; only language trying to treat the Real. "Tis now the very witching time of night, When churchyards yawn, and hell itself breathes out/ Contagion to this world. Now could I drink hot blood./ And do such bitter business as the day/ Would quake to look on. Soft, now to my mother. O heart, lose not/ thy nature . . ." ¹⁴ But, of course, he is not about to kill Gertrude. Obsessional sons do not kill their mothers. Actual death is, rather, a matter of deferred time for the obsessional whose desire is rigidified, motionless, awaiting release from Other masters. But the deferral (Freud's *Nachträglichkeit*, Lacan's *apres-coup*) is not merely a deferral of meaning or a matter of phonemes slipping. We are dealing, rather, with unconscious timing where anticipated certainty has the structure of metonymy (the cause of desire) whose sense becomes clearer in light of the law of metaphor (symptom) whose fundamental timing concerns *desiring* intentions. On the side of metonymy, produced by metaphor, one finds the *object a* as a libidinal object, rather than the phenomenological object or person one usually mistakes for "the object". Although Hamlet thinks his objects are persons (mother, uncle, girlfriend, ghost), the "object" he actually awaits is a structural shift. Such an "object" concerns vitality and freedom. He awaits a release from a burden of guilt borne in compensation for a Father's Name in default. He awaits release from a drama played out retroactively in relation to the primal scene to which he clings, and which imprisons him. He also awaits release from a nostalgia concerning a mother's love too precious to drop, long after this love has ceased to serve him well.

After seeing the ghost-his father reminding him not only of his own unsettled accounts, but of Hamlet's unpaid debt as well-Hamlet runs to Ophelia with his doublet unbraced, no hat, stockings fouled, pale, shaking her arm, perusing her face, waving his head, emitting a

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piteous sigh, as if blind (Act. 11, Sc. 1). Ophelia is compassionate. Her father sees love there. Lacan sees the unconscious fantasy decomposing to let the "uncanny"-the lack in the Symbolic-appear (22). Indeed, after this scene Hamlet loves Ophelia no longer. His mother took him as an infant to be the object that fulfilled her desire. This is Gertrude's wont with males, babies or adults, sons or lovers. Obsessional aggression towards another woman-not the mother-arises when this eternal son (the obsessional male) identifies Woman as the source of his impotence; feels the unconscious guilt of not wanting to desire.

"Get thee to a nunnery," Hamlet says to Ophelia. Lacan points out the double meaning in Shakespeare's day. "Go to a brothel" or "Go to a convent". The law of the incest taboo has raised its head in the guise of Woman; not the actual biological taboo against the mother, but psychic incest. Too much desire emanating from a female is reminiscent of a mother's narcissistic demands too great for her child to satisfy. Hamlet displaces his rage at Gertrude's smothering love-her use of him at the expense of his freedom-onto Ophelia who becomes the desired *objet a*. In "A and a in Clinical Structures", Jacques-Alain Miller describes this object as that which destroys the illusion that there is a distance between inside and outside in matters of identification and affect.¹⁵ Hamlet unconsciously identifies himself as his mother's precious object. In Imaginary relations he projects his narcissistic investment onto Ophelia. But because neither the mother's desire, nor the signifier for difference-the paternal metaphor of a father's name-have given Hamlet a script in the Other that will permit him to exit from their novel, he can only flail impotently in his supposed love for an other. Ophelia, therefore, becomes witness to the closeted life of unconscious desire he leads. Insofar as Hamlet's unconscious identification with Ophelia is split off or disassociated from his conscious understanding of it, the procedure of identification typical of obsession is the reverse of the foreclosure of the signifier for the Father's Name in the unconscious that Lacan located in psychosis. In a psychotic structuring of desire, the unconscious complicity between mother's and son's desire is symmetrical, albeit unbearable for the child. In obsession, the mother's would-be female rivals are punished, both for their rivalry and for their sexuality, and for revealing the obsessional's secret wish to remain alive, but as if he were dead. What is kept quiet is that the Father's Name is too much with him, producing guilt. Only when he has destroyed Ophelia as a desirable object can

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Hamlet intuit, although not with conscious "insight", that losing her still does not eradicate the loss at the center of his life. He still remains a man who cannot identify with a signifier for the Father's Name-for the comfort of difference-that would make him potent.

Lacan argues that Hamlet's destiny is an encounter with time, between two deaths: the actual death of his father and his own encounters with death as the signifier around which his life is threaded. On the one hand he refuses to kill Claudius; refuses to rival for his manhood, except for a moment after Ophelia's death which occasions Laertes' dramatic act of mourning. In this moment of unconscious timing, Hamlet no longer needs to replace his mother by a substitute other. The *object* of his desire has once again become the impossible, the "true" object of his desire. With Ophelia's dead body in view, he is free to take on a worthy masculine rival, an alter ego. He begins to compete with Laertes in *Ophelia's grave*, to the point of trying to kill him. In his fight with Laertes and his subsequent (albeit passive) acceptance of the tournament, he identifies as a man-with a man-for a moment ("Desire . . ." 34). Yet one must wonder why Hamlet goes through with a tournament rigged against him. Why not end the obsessional cycle with a cure? With the intimation of psychic freedom implied in his fight with Laertes?

Because, I would suggest, literature works with veiled problems, not with answers to the human condition, or with suggestions as to what a character or a person might "do with their symptoms". Yet, the artist who works with a veiled Real elevates the object to the level of its grandeur, especially in tragedy. The object is sublime-not unconscious or repressed-because it "drives" reader and author (and ordinary people) just beyond the level of understanding, at the place of missed encounters, desperate strivings, there where Shakespearean poisoned foils are the effects of words committed and acts forestalled. Hamlet completes the circuit of the obsessional son. He kills his opponent and the king dies. Shakespeare has dramatized the impossibilities in a life whose object of desire is nostalgia; is for the very loss mourning opens up. The added tragedy is the obsessional's conviction made explicit in the *Hamlet* drama-that he has committed a crime. And he has in terms of the effects of unconscious desire. He has taken his father's position in the normative order of the signifying chain. Oedipus does not know. Hamlet knows. Although the guilt is split between Hamlet and his uncle, there is no doubt that his crime is psychic incest and patricide. Freud invented a myth in the murder of the primal

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father, where Lacan found the Real. There where the law of incest is imposed, each of us is made to renew continually the relation of desire to law in the humanizing of sexuality. But the *jouissance* of "drives" trips up desire, neurotic desire bending to the Other's law, for instance. Whether we speak of neurotic, pervert or psychotic Lacan taught that the Real enemy of human subjects is the inconsistency that emanates from the fact that there is no sexual relation fundamentally inscribed in the human unconscious. In our search for pleasure and harmony we are thrown back, instead, on the *jouissance* that marks each of us as our most precious good, whether or not *it* wishes our good.

Lacan located three logical moments in time that break the linearity of grammar, punctuating language with the unconscious logic of desire: the instant of seeing; the time for understanding; the moment of concluding. Seeing his father's ghost disorganizes Hamlet's world, hystericalizes an obsessional structure that had duped him into thinking things were under control. The play occurs in suspended time, in acts meant to achieve some understanding of what Hamlet has seen. Hamlet never comes to understand what he has seen, at least consciously. But unconsciously he plays out the drama of his own tragic structure right up to its lethal possibilities. Because he has understood nothing, the play is the *Thing*, the veiled *objet a*, and madness only a veil.

Notes

1. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet in The Oxford Shakespeare*, ed. G. R. Hibberd (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

2. Jacques Lacan, "Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet* (1959)," trans. by James Hulbert, special issue ed. by Shoshana Felman in *Yale French Studies* 55/56 (1977): 11-52.

3. *Le Seminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XXI: Les non-dupes errent* (1973/1974), Unpublished Seminar, November 13, 1973.
4. *Le Seminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XX: Encore* (1972-1973), text established by Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1975), p.12.
5. Lydia Gomez Mussel, "Breves puntuaciones acerca de la psicosis," *Revista del Cercle Psicoanalitic de Catalunya* 9 (April 1989): 39.
6. Jacques Lacan, "Joyce le symptome I", "Joyce le symptome II", "Le sinthome (Seminaire du 18 novembre 1975)", "Le sinthome (Seminaire du 20 janvier 1976)" in *Joyce avec Lacan*, eel. by Jacques Aubert, preface by JacquesAlain Miller (Paris: Navarin, 1987).
7. Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia (1916)," *SE*, 14: 239-59, pp. 249-51.

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8. Jacques Lacan, "The Subversion of the subject and the dialectic of desire in the unconscious," in *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. and eel. by Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), p. 315.
9. Z. Lagrotta, "Le concept d'aphanisis dans la nevrose obsessionnelle,"
Hysterie et Obsession: Les structures cliniques de la nevrose et la direction de la cure (Collection of reports from the Fourth International Encounter, Paris, 14-17 February, 1986), p. 290.
10. Jacques Lacan, "Seminar on *The Purloined Letter*," in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1988), pp. 47-48.
11. Sigmund Freud, "The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex (1924)," *SE*, 19: 173-79.
12. Jacques Lacan, "Of Structure as an Inmixing of an Otherness prerequisite to any subject whatever," eel. by Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato in *The Structuralist Controversy: Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1972), p. 188.
13. Jacques Lacan, *Television* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), reprinted in English translation in *October* 40 (Spring, 1987): 7-50.
14. Cf. Act. III, sc. ii, 11. 371-76. Quoted from G. R. Hibberd ed., *Hamlet*.
15. Jacques-Alain Miller, "A and a in Clinical Structures," in *Acts of the [First] Paris-New York Psychoanalytic Workshop*, eel. by Stuart Schneiderman (New York City, 1987), pp. 24-25.

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