

A Writing of the Real

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"The Writing of The Real" uses Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory to explore the "failure in representation, a hole in the middle of perception". The author thinks through the problems this hole presents: gaps, fadings, flickerings, and discontinuities in images and words. This hole or *objet a* cuts us to the quick, cuts certainties and consistencies, and points to a lack and loss in our knowledge, perceptions, and being. This *objet a* reminds us that wholeness in images, languages, or beings exists only in an Imaginary ordering of the world, and that any explanation of our system of thinking or visual design must include lack as part of that system. Desire enters the field when we look at what we cannot bear to look at. But, this emergence of desire through the breaks in our epistemological ground loosens rigidities and opens up inventive attempts to re-present the *objet a* as a writing of the Real.

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The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) tried to solve the problematic in which positivistic thinking reached a deadend. Positivism could only account for experience by viewing language and images as clearly representable through various methods or philosophies; these methods produced variations on a theme of "it is what it is". I shall argue here that formalist arguments, arguments that take the word, letter or image to be "itself" repeat positivistic errors. These effects (language and images), Lacan pointed out, account for neither gaps, fadings, flickerings, nor discontinuities within perceiving, knowing, and being. Lacan subverts the positivistic and formalistic commonplace assumption about how words, letters and images function in knowledge. To investigate how images link to words, and how these linkages encourage invention, we must first understand that neither the letter nor the image veils some hidden object. Instead, there is a failure in representation, a hole in the middle of perception, gaps within letters and images that make them other than what they appear to represent. In Lacanian theory, dreams and representations "hold the place of . . ." something a dreaming subject does not want to know, but which insists in his knowledge anyway.

While people usually assume they relate to language and images naturally and spontaneously, a Real gap exists between perception and the referent that makes perceiving possible in the first place. In Lacanian theory, a perceiving subject, while not a set of sense data, is made up of pieces of desire that cannot re-present themselves directly. Desire is the desire for what knowledge lacks. So desire places gaps and fadings in every perceptual act: speaking, writing, seeing, tasting, and so on. Indeed, desire makes lack itself a part of any act of perceiving or knowing; but, we continually deny lack because we do not wish to know that we are not whole beings or whole bodies or whole minds.

An originary loss underlies the lack that exists as a player in every act of knowing or being. This palpable void of the originary loss connects body and mind; languages and images organize themselves around it in order to veil it, to close it out. This hole of loss itself, objects lost forever, limits individual desire (pleasures, pains, rules of discourse, or whatever). Indeed, this real hole of *jouissance* (agony and ecstasy) keeps subjects in homeostasis or constancy. Life organizes itself around this blockage or point beyond which one cannot go: "death drive."

Images and words hide truth. But, for Lacan, truth does not refer to the "truth" of religious experience, philosophical coherence, nor correspondence theories.¹ Lacan refers to that truth of desire which plays a hidden or distorted part in speech, writing and perception. Paradoxically, this truth *is* a visible language. It appears naked at the surface of letters and images; letters and images performed for the purpose of showing (perhaps by hiding

or distorting) desire. But, since people do not always know what they desire or what their desires mean, desire appears as enigmatic motivations or intentions that dance through words and images. In this theory truths are the fictions inserted into speech and vision by images and words in an ongoing exchange between the ever absent (desire) and the ever present (speaking and seeing). Like images and words, desire does not *re-present* itself directly, but only in an *as if* way. It is only a semblance of itself.

Subjective perception hides the way images and words function. It hides that function by confusing the feelings attached to words or images with “the thing in itself”. But, visible language and representational art function to decorate or enclose a void. The void is not metaphorical, allegorical, mythical, analogical, and so on, but is Real. People cling (pro- or con-) to images and words because the unbearable alternative of their *ab-sens* is to fall into the gaps within ourselves. This is a slide into anxiety. In this theory the void of heaven and hell becomes something other than mythical construct. They become human metaphors invented for the purposes of exteriorizing a void that is in knowledge and being, but that is not understood. Moreover, since words and images serve as social constructs and conventions, it is all too easy to make a link between group conventions and beliefs. From that assumption one might guess that the truth of images resides within specific images of social conventions. Criticism of the ideological underpinnings of images fails to question where images come from and why they exist. Art, on the other hand, never ceases to pose the question of its own enigmatic *raison d'être*. In solving this enigma one could follow Descartes's logic and assume that language is a thing a-part from the body, that affective responses speak a truth of their own. In the picture I am offering, affective responses tell lies. The language of hate, love, hope, rage, guilt, etc. is not a language that speaks itself or for itself. While one group can agree to hate the language of *Playboy* philosophy—word and image—, another group will agree to love that language. Neither will ever convince the other as to who is right or wrong because the language of affect comes from *jouissance* or the narcissistic pleasure (or pain) each person takes from the loss around which his or her desires are elaborated. Strangely enough, the real loss around which images and letters are organized is, in Lacanian theory, the loss of clear definition between body, gender and sexuality. “Much ado about nothing”, and “the sound and fury signifying nothing” suggest the complexities of sewing together body pieces into representational language that seems to correspond to social expectations and personal desires, but never quite do. The outcomes are “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune”. Sex and love drive language and inhabit images; they are the angels and demons of desire. Depending on the desiring structure of a given individual or group leader, or the structuring of a group around a desiring preference for

affiliation with a certain kind of leader, a response to images and words will be a response to the desire of the Other. The Other is that network of signifying chains, extrinsic to every person, but whose desire directs and speaks with a mysterious certainty. The desire of each person.

Lacan saw knowing and desiring as interwoven processes. The fantasies that we assume to be reality, and which we call reality by identifying with groups who share our fantasies, is, very simply, a screen. Every subject's perceiving is structured piece by piece from the start of life and before in a criss-crossing network of words, images, and experiences and their effects (what Lacan calls the Symbolic, Imaginary, and Real orders). This necklace-like chain constitutes the place of the Other, or the treasury of signifiers that speaks us. Put another way, one sees and speaks because an unconscious set of signifying chains feeds material into speech and vision. In one loop of the necklace — that Lacan called the Imag(e)-inary order — we find images producing the forms of identificatory material. In another we find language, rules or conventions — the Symbol-ic order — that govern a specific culture. In a third loop (the Real, beyond reality) we find the effects of words, images or experiences insofar as they were inscribed as traumatic, and thus produce effects, but remain unsymbolized in (un)conscious knowledge. In this picture of perceiving and knowing, persons are constellations or drive montages constituted by words, sounds, images, and effects shaping mind and body in order to elaborate unconscious desire. This desire is the desire to know what has fallen out of our memories, but niggles at the back of our minds and bodies. We desire to know because we do not know. We do not know what is forgotten, unassimilated or what response lies fallow, waiting to be triggered into some form.

Lacan invented a “letter” that would stand in for the *cause* that pushes everyone to know, a cause he attributed to “objects” that connect body to knowledge. This “letter”, the *objet a* denotes the primordial “objects” of desire that Lacan called pre-specular, the lining of the subject. Humans are first structured as desiring creatures in reference to bodily orifices and functions that seem attached to an organ. Lacan's innovation is to show that these “objects” give rise to partial “drives” that grow into constellations of meaning around: the breast, the feces, the urinary flow, the (imaginary) phallus, the phoneme, the gaze, the voice and the void.² But since these objects are lost, they only exist as enigmatic material that “returns” as disruptive, discontinuous affective signals.

The tricky part in Lacan's thinking here is that words and images do not refer first and foremost to objects in the world. They refer, on one hand, to the way words and images connect knowledge to desire in each subject taken as a particularity of desiring responses and effects. Put another way, desire depends, not on objects, but on fantasies. On the other hand, images and

words are haunted by the effects of the *objet a*. Interpretation depends, not on texts, methods, or truths, then, but on the meaning that makes desire a kind of knowing, an unconscious intentionality. The *objet a* denotes a place where knowing and desiring come together in an encounter or impasse. But the *objet a* are not representations. Rather, the *objet a* denotes a beyond the image and the word. It is the “object” people cannot bear to see because it reminds them of a loss at the center of everything human, a void that is filled up with the garbage of the universe. It is the Real, the *objet* of all the missed encounters. This *objet* is the reason people in elevators avert their eyes from each other, staring at walls, ceilings, floors, all *as if* deep in thought. Why do they look away? Because to look at unknown others in such an intimate encounter is to look at the gaze itself—that *objet* separable from (separate from) the eye that lets us know we are always looked at from somewhere, always judged. Lacan’s *objet a* forces knowledge of discontinuity on us. And discontinuity is the enemy we fight in many names and under multiple guises. Images and words have a particular ring for each person, because they refer the subject *qua* subject to another signifier in a closed necklace of resonating sounds and associations that we usually call “mind” or perception or cognition. In a Lacanian picture, the *objet a* blocks images and words from joining in any one-to-one way. No act of knowing or seeing can escape fading because some piece of the Real always blocks any final join between signifiers and signifieds (meanings), or between images and words. No repetition can ever be a repetition of the same. We never return to the same moment because the unconscious is change, anchored by the Real as the basement of fixity. Yet, Real fixities are palpable absences. These keep images and words from coming together, from revealing each other as transparent meanings.

But, when a Lacanian signified (effects of unconscious signifying chains) do hook with a signifier, an *objet a* appears. Time appears in the form of the Real to stop the infinite flow of words and things, showing that when we arrive at an impasse in thinking, imagining, inventing, we have stumbled on an *objet a* that blocks desire, and also gives birth to the desire to circumvent that blockage. These “little letters” guarantee that what a reader finds in a text, or a viewer in a picture, is not exactly what the writer or artist intended (even if he or she knows what that is). Nor does it correspond exactly with what the reader or viewer knows either. Lack and loss play an apparently invisible role in pushing language and images askew from any objective interpretation.

In looking at texts or at images, people try to know — not what is there — but what they want. What they want is usually to be recognized: to be right, to be loved. People can only guess at desire (insofar as desire is the desire not to know) through image/text mirroring. This, because the chains of associa-

tive knowledge that speak subjects, also look at them *as if* from “outside”, while remaining opaque and titillating, rather than present and full. What subjects quest for in texts or in images is what they do not know about who they are, why they exist, or what they want. The reason they take rigid positions regarding who they are, what they know, and so on, is because they must try to stop the shifting sands of desire that tease from within the body, and because underlying desire is the loss that mimes death.

By accepting that there is a lack in the image or word, as well as in the perceiver, one realizes that if lack is itself a palpable component in the desire to know, it cannot reside in an external object any more than in the perceiver. This may sound like a complicated theory. And it can be proved by complex arguments, mathematical ones (particularly topological), and clinical arguments based on new theories and practices regarding the cause and treatment of psychosis. For the purposes of my argument, I will say only what everybody knows: No person is One with him or herself. We never “get our acts together” because we are not together. There is a hole in language, a hole in knowledge, a hole in being. There are holes in relationships. The *objet a* marks that discontinuity and fragmentation which humans fight with every assumption of totality; they deny the discontinuities that make flesh of the word and donought holes of the body. Contemporary anatomy books describe our digestive systems (from mouth to anus) as a hole — external to the internal/on the same surface — yet apparently internal.

The *objet a* returns from the Real of a place lost in memory, bringing fragments of loss, pieces of pain, memories of ecstasies, to place cuts in everything. Lack (desire) plays at the edge of loss, residing somewhere between sentient subject and artifact or product, drawing them to each other by identificatory traits that attract by familiarity, repugnance, nostalgia, sensory response, and so on.

With lack placed as a palpable presence in desire, standing between loss and what it represses and thus written as a blank to be filled in, Lacan offered a new theory of knowing. We do not know merely by isolating or using rhetorical strategies, nor by identifying with images, or stories of events that seem analogous to us as “whole” identities, or even with methodologies or ideological preferences which we assume to be correct because they are ours. We identify with unconscious desires that desire for us. We identify with laws that were put in place as our cornerstones. We seek to know because we do not know. Looking, reading, inventing, are so many uses of language and images to say over and over that the search to know is the search itself. What do we seek? Love, fulfillment of desire, laws with which to identify limits, and desires that will try to break these laws up to the point of our endurance. That the visible language into which such “drives” hook themselves is the material of images and words is a powerful idea: *jouissance* effects, light up the

meanings that link language to body across the bridge of desire, materializing images and words. The catch-22 in this theory bases the human quest to know on a desire not to know that *we* are made up of secrets, wounds, scars, haunting voices from past generations in our family, names we cannot live up to, erotic passions that seem more to claim us than we them, and so on. Lacan's writing of the Real with his *objet a* is clearly not a correspondence theory, nor one of coherence. The only locatable traits of an unconscious knowledge are signifiers in a subject's discourse; but, these signifiers are hidden by the unified nature of grammar and the concrete density of letters and images. Nor can the *objet a* serve as direct referents between body, language and desire because they correspond only to a void or a cut, the cut of the Real as it brings us up short by a fluttering of eyelashes, the anecdotes of children, the sacrificial marks made on bodies in cultural rituals, the cut of a word into silence, or vice-versa. The Lacanian void valorizes the hole mathematical topology has discovered, but cannot account for. In human beings the void continually empties nonsensical and meaningless, but painfully concrete, material into our thoughts and desires, the garbage we dismiss, but which elicits affect all the same. And all cuts confront us with the void created by the fact that we are not totalized persons, desires or bodies, dealing with totalized artifacts. Indeed, artifacts show us back to ourselves in the pieces we work at keeping glued together by every possible theory of continuity, even theories of continuity which hang onto letters or events by one arbitrary law: the law of chance.

The picture I want to create is the human subject as a knowing, perceiving, sentient creature who looks more like a piece of modern sculpture than like a person.

Between sense and nonsense, unique traits peel off of the *objet a*, joining word and transference in an indissoluble marriage. But what is being transferred? The answer is desire and *jouissance*. How? By images or letters or words that evoke resonance as signifiers or (re-presentations) propped up against an *objet a*. This is the way, Lacan argued, that we think. These signifiers joined to the *objet* make meaning because all meaning surrounds a void, placing desire at the edge of the hole that topology discovered in its remapping of space away from the positivism of descriptive geometry, but does not know how to valorize.³

In the Lacanian picture, body and language are libidinated "organs" that bear cuts and make cuts, thus joining flesh to word or image at the edges, rims or surfaces of the body. Little fragments

of “information” help argue this theory. We know that those blind from birth see gaps in everything once they become sighted through modern surgical techniques. They have to be taught to see closures, just as children have to learn “flat” representational drawing (things as they are!). When left to draw on their own, children make blurbs and blobs, not people and trees. People who become deaf, but not from birth, continue to hear sounds attached to certain images like silent images that, strangely, produce a kind of noise identifiable as memory.⁴ I would even suggest that the new monster disease that haunts elementary schools and has been labeled “dyslexia” — a brain dysfunction — is the spreading out and rigidifying of an effect into reading and writing that is called “normal” in four and five year old children. How can dyslexia — turning letters and numbers around or upside down—be normal at five years of age and a disease at fifteen? Is dyslexia not a malfunctioning of letters turned askew by those children who are not taught to re-present letters in some culture specific alphabetical way? Is it not like learning to play the piano with the wrong fingering?

Lacan found loss at the center of everything, a loss that pierces knowing, representing, perceiving, being. But the loss in question is not emptiness. Rather, it is a black hole effect that sucks material in to cover itself over, to protect the subject from confronting loss head-on because it produces raw anxiety and a glimpse of “inner” chaos. In the case of psychosis, people are actually sucked into this void and bombarded by words, sounds, and images; things we call delusions are another way of saying dreaming awake.⁵ Artists turn such visions inside out, externalizing the monsters of human beings, showing the distance we have from specific re-presentations that are palpably inscribed as traumatic effects. Although one cannot generalize too much about trauma, separation that threatens a loss of being or body counts as traumatic, as does the assumption of sexuality in relation to gender identity, and the problem of death. Traumatic events create knots, impasses, obstacles or blockages. Although knots remain dense when undeciphered, the *objet a* returns into language and vision as punctuation points, pointing to some spat out fragments of the Real. Just as a black hole coughs out pieces of rock and lava, the void Lacan called *jouissance* spits out pieces of the gaze (judging, not seeing), best exemplified in expressionist paintings where the eye is used as a weapon to persuade the viewer to look away.⁶

What does all this have to do with “visible language”? To see anew, to create, to invent, we use the visible to decorate the *objet a*, to mount them as collages that “drive”.⁷ In Lacanian theory these “objects” stand in for an

image, and break up the subjectivity of narrative and perception (*Seminar XI*, p. 59). The longer we stare at any image, the more we see it has no truth to yield, but is itself a mask. Insofar as images are always already defined in any person's network of unconscious signifying chains, at the level of the personal, images are *sinthomal*. At the level of the cultural, they have a shared or collective meaning: a local "universal". This may sound like the kind of thing Judith Williamson has in mind when she points to a double sense to the meaning of "images" of, for example, a woman. Descriptions of the images define one level of meaning in terms such as "cute", "aggressive", and so on; and the photograph itself is the second level meaning or the "actual representation".⁸ Williamson is trying to understand J.L. Baudry's idea that a surface, suggesting nothing but itself, still suggests that there is something behind it and thus prevents us from considering it as a surface (*Consuming Passions*, p. 92).

The difference advanced by Lacan's thinking is that the representation is not "the thing itself". That is, the words attributed to an image to describe it and the image can not be disintricated. What Williamson calls the "real" thing or the representation — the photograph or the object — is, rather, a covering up of desire and *jouissance* effects. We "see" in a unified way in order not to see that the consistency of the photo is a learned way of seeing the body, or in the case of linguistic attributions, to be attached to a text of some sort. Lacan's *objet a* is a writing of the Real, shining through the emptiness of social (or Symbolic as he calls it) order discourse, blinking on and off to show that as long as meaning re-presents, it does so to positivize a void.

Images reassure us, convincing us that the world is not looking at us, giving us the illusion that we master the world because we look at it (furtively, longingly, smugly...), when we only look at it because it looks at us. The zero of the *petit a* is the means by which visual desire masks the anxiety (intellectually experienced as doubt or questioning) confronted by the knowledge that there are holes and discontinuities everywhere that everything rushes in to fill up. The burden of visible language — words and images — is nothing less than the burden of living all life at the level of pretense of wholenesses. One proof of this theory is the simple fact that egos (or belief systems) are rigidly maintained and defended, to the point of killing self or other (either in fact or by cruelty), lest explosion of or decentering of preferred system(s) be threatened. But since images and language can only momentarily pin down a desire trying to negotiate itself through the exchange of fantasies and words with an other, the *objet a* is a horrifying reminder that inconsistency lives much closer to the human heart than we would want to admit. Gazes pursue us. We eat some words, just as we regurgitate others. Voices haunt us, make us cry, make us grit our teeth. What lacks, then, is not specular, not graspable in the image.⁹ Nor is it

graspable in the word. What lacks is that desire itself can never be once and for all, totally satiated. The “dirty trick” that chases our efforts to master pieces of knowledge—if only the concrete poetry of letters placed just so—is that desire is itself interpretation. Interpretation that shows up in the most cruel point of the object: when a voice tears itself away from a word, delibidinizing it, or when the eye suddenly realizes that the image it tries to fix is not what one insists it be.

Both art and desire reveal the secret of invention by making the *objet a* appear, by working with and around it. This theory is Lacan’s reinterpretation of Freud’s equation of sublimation with repression.¹⁰ It shows us that what we try to hide in ordinary discourse and realistic representational art is the gaze divorced from the eye because we want the eye to be benevolent when the gaze gives it, instead, an appetite: lusting, desiring, judging. Because images and words are never adequate to the task of conveying what they are about, because aesthetic theories remain cold and lifeless, we go back to art to try once again to theorize it, staring at the wisps of nostalgia, drinking them in, grabbing at the cuts in time that elude us as in a dream. Yet, we flee the *objet a* as they appear because they destroy the unities that keep us feeling ourselves to be whole bodies, whole minds, masters of desire and language. We flee them in the fictions we write, not as fiction, but at the level where fiction tells a truth. We flee these “objects” when they show up in icons to tell us that we worship or disdain idols because we are god: to master is “to be me”/ *m’être*/god. We feast with our eyes and come with our voices, but quickly intellectualize these acts of desire lest we suspect ourselves of being tautological decorations, monuments of magnificent no-thingness.

Surrealist theories of art do not account for the idea that we are metaphors, rather than that we make or speak metaphors. Surrealist collages will never truly *épater la bourgeoisie* because the subject is already dominated by signifying chains that re-present him or her as a subject falling out of the chain, a missing link, a subject of desire who exists as subject only in the purview of an other. Indeed, the capacity to think abstractly is the law of metaphor: the power to substitute one thing for another already there, but not entirely *visible* because of the strange ways time and space function in desire and memory. If forms are incoherent, “off”, creating no-thing, chances are we are in the realm of psychosis where metonymy has taken over the function of metaphor to reveal the poverty and sterility of an *hors sens* when a signifying chain functions in a “pure” fashion, little perturbed by any desire to reconstitute anything for any other.¹¹ *Jouissance* without love or desire robs language of its flesh, its materiality.

Both history with its implicit omniscient observer and speech act theory with its primitive tribe miss the point: that language acts make social links (Imaginary/identificatory) because language relies on itself only for the

purpose of winning love. We cannot deconstruct language, finally, because we are not psychotic. We rely on the names others have given objects out of deference and love, and we destroy the same out of the effort to win love beyond the law of some "authority" whose injunctions will always reveal us as creatures torn by the opposition between desire and love. This tension drives us to create, to create anew, to invent something that will earn the recognition of others by bearing the stamp of our names (a mark of the real like the *objet a* in Lacanian theory). John Searle leaves out the personal, while Saul Kripke dismisses the other to whom our words and images are sent. Every letter and every image used to create anew speaks the grandeur and tragedy of the human: the "I am this" in its endless circular chase, asking "what is I"? The *objet a* pokes its head out to say we are "headless subjects" (*Seminar XI*), "subjects" of endless efforts and missed encounters.

notes

¹ Donald Davidson, "Le philosophe de Platon", *Ornicar?*, no. 46 (automne 1988): 21-39. This article, translated into French by Jacqueline Carnaud, appeared in the *London Review of Books*, August 1, 1985.

² Jacques Lacan, "Subversion of the subject and dialectic of desire in the Freudian Unconscious", *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1977), p. 315.

³ Jeanne Granon-Lafont, *La topologie ordinaire de Jacques Lacan* (Paris: Point Hors Ligne, 1985), p. 41. This book is currently being translated by David Shephard for publication in England and the USA.

⁴ Oliver Sacks, "Mysteries of the Deaf", *The New York Review*, March 27, 1986, pp. 23-33. Commenting on *Deafness* by David Wright (Stein and Day, 1969), the South African poet and novelist who became deaf at the age of seven, Sacks says: "Wright speaks of the 'phantasmal voices' which he hears when anyone speaks to him provided he can see the movement of their lips and faces, and of how he would 'hear' the sougning of the wind whenever he saw trees of branches being stirred by the wind . . . For those deafened after hearing is well established, the world remains full of sounds even though they are 'phantasmal.'" (p. 23).

⁵ Jacques Lacan, "On a question preliminary to any possible treatment of psychosis", *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1977), pp. 179-225.

⁶ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis (Seminar XI)*, text established by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Alan Sheridan (W.W. Norton & Co., 1981), p. 101.

⁷ See chapter 13 in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* on the "Démontage de la pulsion" (erroneously translated as "the deconstruction of the drive"), pp. 161-173.

⁸ Judith Williamson, "A piece of the action" in *Consuming Passions* (London: Marion Boyars, 1986), p. 92.

⁹ Jacques Lacan, *L'Angoisse, Séminaire X* (1962-1963), unpublished Seminar, May 22, 1963.

¹⁰ In April of 1987 Jacques-Alain Miller spoke at the *Living Cinema* forum in New York City, saying that art does not provide pleasure, but *jouissance* which satisfies unconscious drives. "Art is not a product of the unconscious (*pace* Surrealism), but rather that of the most civilizing urge. That significantly, is sublimation — which is popularly confused with repression. For this reason, art can be said to 'respond' [but not correspond] to the unconscious." This quote is taken from the article by John Miller, "Jacques Lacan's *Television*", *Artscribe* 66 (Nov./Dec. 1987): 41.

¹¹ Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre III: Les psychoses* (1955-1956), text established by Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1981). This Seminar is currently being translated by Russell Grigg for publication by Norton in the USA and in England.