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Uncanny Encounters: on Writing, Anxiety and *jouissance*

Dominique Hecq

*In the following article, words followed by * can be found in the glossary located immediately before the References.*

All writing...begins with panic: the panic of absence, the sweet panic that accompanies the blank page, notes, quotations, drawings, maps, an accumulation of verbal and visual signs put down haphazardly. A concept emerges. Intuition takes over. Meanwhile all kinds of decisions have to be taken consciously or unconsciously. That's when the panic in the face of excess strikes.... Sometimes the moment you start writing, all panic, like all sense of awkwardness, disappears. Sometimes panic takes over before you even put pen to paper. The material itself is so overwhelming that you have to take yourself away from the desk. And you may have to stay away from your desk for days, weeks, months at a time (Hecq, 2)

These opening words come from the mouth of Blanche, a character in a novel in progress entitled *The Ear in the Heart* (because you need your ear and your heart as much as language in order to read and write). Amazingly, they contain in a nutshell the questions that I have been trying to articulate about the creative process for quite some time in an attempt to define the possibilities and limitations of writing as *suppliance**, a late Lacanian concept. Besides, I thought that many readers would have experienced to some degree the anxieties that Blanche evokes in my fiction.

In this paper, I'd like to investigate the relationship between writing as symptom, anxiety and *jouissance**, or more particularly, between writing as *sinthome** (a particular form of the symptom as *suppliance*), anxiety, and two forms of *jouissances*: phallic *jouissance* and the *jouissance* of the Other. I hope to be able to suggest that anxiety is the organizing principle of the *jouissance* of the writer – for as an affect transmuted into writing, anxiety contributes to creating another sense beyond its signification, which means that a supplementary *jouissance* invades the scene of writing. Thus, although neither writing nor anxiety are symptoms as such, anxiety organizes the writing process in a way that 'harmonizes with castration' (Lacan, 15-01-1974) hence making it into a particular type of symptom.

I. What is a symptom and how is it distinct from the *sinthome* or symptom as a type of *suppléance*?

For an analyst, a symptom is not only 'what causes suffering, indicating something amiss in the Real,' but also it has to be identified as such by the sufferer (Harari, 2002: 45). Thus for Patrick White, who never tired of saying how much he hated writing and how painful it was, writing was clearly a symptom. James Joyce, on the other hand, never admitted to any writing symptom. And yet Jacques Lacan shows in his 1975-76 seminar that Joyce was one with his symptom / *sinthome*.

Sinthome, as Lacan makes clear, is an archaic spelling of the French *symptome* from which the English 'symptom' derives. Lacan (re-)introduces the term in 1975 (for its punning possibilities) as the title for his seminar on James Joyce. The point is to highlight what is particular about Joyce's symptom. Through an elaboration of his topology of the subject as underpinned by the concept of the Borromean knot (developed the previous year in R.S.I.) and a reading of Joyce's writings, Lacan redefines the symptom as that which ensures the subject's survival by providing a unique organization of *jouissance*.

Lacan follows Freud in his conception of the symptom as a formation of the unconscious, which translates a compromise between two conflicting desires. Although Lacan identifies the symptom with different features of language over the course of his work, he does foreground a linguistic conception right up to his Seminar of 1962-63 on Anxiety. He suggests in 1953 in 'The function and field of speech and language in psychoanalysis', that, like the unconscious, the symptom is itself structured like a language (*Écrits*, 59). Here, in fact, the symptom is a signifier. In Seminar 2, however, the symptom is redefined in terms of signification (Lacan, 1954-55: 320) and in 'The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious' (1957) the symptom is described as 'a metaphor in which flesh or function is taken as a signifying element' (Lacan, 1977: 166). In Seminar V, the symptom is then identified with a message which is qualified in Seminar VII (p.149) as being enigmatic and opaque since it is a message from the real. It is worth pointing out, though, that traces of Lacan's final conception of the symptom as pure *jouissance* that cannot be interpreted, are present in earlier works. In his 1957 paper on 'Psychoanalysis and its teaching', for instance, the symptom is seen as 'inscribed in a writing process' (Lacan, 1977: 445). Finally, as in *Seminar 10*, the symptom is conceptualised in opposition to the *passage à l'acte** as *jouissance* and hence as not interpretable (Lacan, 23-01-1962).

Thus, the conceptual shift from linguistics to topology which marks Lacan's later work constitutes the symptom as a kernel of *jouissance* immune to the efficacy of the symbolic, as the trace of the unique modality of the subject's enjoyment: Joyce's symptom / *sinthome* is the writing that allows him to go on to live by providing a unique mode of *jouissance*. In this sense, the *sinthome* is an unacknowledged symptom with a stabilizing effect, for as Lacan has shown, Joyce managed to avoid the onset of psychosis by deploying his art as *suppléance*. The symptom acts here as a supplementary link in his

subjective knot, if you wish, for at this stage in his thinking Lacan is refiguring the topology of the subject in terms of Borromean knots*. The *sinthome* thus appears as the trace of Joyce's particular modality of *jouissance*, the kernel of enjoyment immune to the efficacy of the symbolic. To put it simply, Joyce's writing is that which allowed him to go on living while remaining sane.

II. What is anxiety and why such a privileged position in this paper?

'The problem of anxiety,' says Freud in his Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis (1917) 'is a nodal point at which the most various and important questions converge, a riddle whose solution would be bound to throw a flood of light on our whole mental existence (Standard Edition, or SE, 16:393)'. For Lacan too, anxiety has a special status. In the opening session to Seminar 10, *L'angoisse*, he says: 'anxiety is precisely the crossroads where all of my previous discourse awaits you, including a certain number of terms which up to now may have seemed to you insufficiently related. You will see how anxiety is the field where these terms are knotted together, and thereby take on their own places more readily.' (14.11.62). This special status of anxiety will lead to the articulation of the lacanian discovery of *objet a**, cause of desire. However, let's not forget that Lacan originally conceptualised *objet a* as the product of excess *jouissance*. For it is this short-cut between desire and *jouissance*, nowhere more obvious than in Seminar 17, that enables Roberto Harari to say that '*anxiety acts as a hinge between jouissance and desire*' (2001: 133; original emphasis). Similarly, it is what enables me to speculate on the function of anxiety for creative writers.

Freud, it is usually assumed, produced two theories of anxiety. These are known as the first and second theories of anxiety. From 1884 to 1925 he argues that neurotic anxiety is a transformation of sexual libido that wasn't properly discharged. Nonetheless, in 1926, Freud claims that anxiety is a reaction to a 'traumatic situation', i.e., an experience of helplessness in the face of an accumulation of excitation that can't be discharged. In Freud's account, birth is the prototype of the traumatic event, the first danger to which the ego responds with anxiety, and indeed it seems to be a 'real danger', to which the baby responds as if its life is at risk by crying, appearing panicked or distressed, urinating, and so on. Freud soon extends this example to a broader sequence of 'threats' or 'traumatic events', from loss of the mother (the so-called 'separation anxiety'), to loss of love, object-loss, and castration, which he elaborates on in terms of 'castration anxiety': anxiety appears as a reaction to the felt loss of the object; and we are at once reminded of the fact that castration anxiety, too, is a fear of being separated from a highly valued object, and that the earliest anxiety of all – the 'primal anxiety of birth' – is brought about on the occasion of a separation from the mother (SE 20:137).

For Freud, then, anxiety appears to be the affect that arises with the threat of separation. This threat, Freud later explains, presents us with a danger to the ego that is quite distinct from an actual threat to life. We seem to have passed from the level of the organism and its survival to the level of the ego and its integrity, though there are several interpretive paths.

Lacan's formulations appear to be directly opposed to Freud's on this point, but it should be pointed out that where Freud discusses the trauma of birth as a 'real danger to life', he also speaks about the foetus' possible awareness of 'a vast disturbance in the economy of its narcissistic libido'. The 'threat' that is 'signalled' by anxiety is therefore a threat, not to life itself, but to the unity of the ego, which is first and foremost the imaginary unity of the body.

Now, where Freud seems to speak of anxiety as a response to separation and loss, Lacan insists that anxiety is not a response to the loss of an object, but rather arises when lack* fails to appear. As Lacan puts it, anxiety arises 'when the lack comes to be lacking'. Perhaps worth mentioning in this respect is that Freud does not develop a theory in which separation or loss (of the mother or an object) is itself the cause of anxiety, or the index of a lack that must somehow be overcome. Isn't it rather that he presents us with a lack that is the condition of the subject's emergence, a constitutive lack-in-being that characterizes speaking beings. And isn't Freud hinting here that the failure to register this lack – its foreclosure, perhaps, gives rise to the experience of anxiety.

Well, to send up of Patrick White a little, it seems that Freud didn't know. But knew. For it is precisely this question that Lacan will elaborate with the help of one of Freud's other texts, 'The Uncanny' (Freud, 1919).

So, what does Lacan find in 'The uncanny'? Freud starts his essay with a long philological, etymological discussion of the word *Unheimliche*. After providing an extensive series of examples while withholding a definition of the term, he ends by saying, with Schelling, 'it is those things that, destined to remain hidden, have nevertheless become manifest'. It is what irrupts when it should not have appeared; what should be lacking is the uncanny. It is, moreover, a 'sudden irruption that does not last'. It is an experience that, at a particular moment, is brought upon the subject, 'leaving him or her petrified'. It is anxiety.

Unheimlich is, as Freud points out, a compound word. The negation prefix *un* precedes *Heimlich* – familiar. *Un-*, he writes, is the mark of repression, which is part of the term as such: 'something that was familiar has become not-familiar, strange, and threatening'. Through the peculiar status of the unconscious, where opposites, far from excluding one another, either substitute for one another or are implied in pairs, the familiar and the not-familiar end up surfacing together.

L'angoisse (Lacan, 1962-63) opens with the assertion that 'anxiety is an affect' as opposed to an emotion (20). What Lacan emphasizes here is that anxiety signals the desire of the Other. Why? Because the distance between desire and *jouissance* is suddenly and unexpectedly shortened – or blurred. Does this mean that the desire of the Other causes anxiety? It would seem so. Why? Because what the Other seeks is to find itself in me, for which it solicits my loss. This situation refers to the desire of the Mother as a location for *das Ding**.

Now, whereas Freud sometimes distinguishes between fear, which has an object, and anxiety, which doesn't, Lacan argues that anxiety is not without an object ('n'est pas sans objet', 103), but rather involves an object that escapes symbolisation. He calls this object *objet petit a**, the object behind desire, or object-cause of desire (115). And anxiety arises when something appears in the place of this object. I call this the shadow of *das Ding*. Lacan calls it the lack of lack.

In Lacan's teachings, *the Name of the Father** should act to separate or break away, introducing a cut between *das Ding* and the child. But how does *das Ding* give way to the irruption of anxiety? What happens is that all limits disappear with a kind of cover up of *objet a*. This is the condition for the manifestation of the uncanny to appear, for the manifestation of what was destined to remain hidden. 'If the *a* suffocates by covering or capping, the dilution of the border put *a* and (-j)* aside, behind the abyssal opening: *das Ding*' says Lacan. The lack of a border endangers the stability of castration. Let me explain what I mean with an illustration, not quite an allegory. What is foregrounded in a symptom such as vertigo – a phobia of heights, is actually a phobia of 'lower depths'. It is the abyss, like *das Ding* that is calling. The subject who suffers from vertigo perceives a call to which she is about to answer, throwing herself into the void. Beyond the vertigo itself, it is what summons her to jump into space, which is characterized specifically by not having any defined borders and being a void. The reverse of the *objet a*, when the borders that it tries to cover are erased, is its hidden hideous underside, its opposite. It is *das Ding*.

III. What is meant by *jouissance* here?

The French word *jouissance* means enjoyment with connotations of excess as well as sexual pleasure. In this sense it is located beyond the Freudian Pleasure Principle. In fact, it is located in the death drive. Thus *jouissance*, Lacan says in Seminar 17, is 'the path towards death' (1969-70: 17). As many commentators have pointed out, there are marked affinities between Freud's concept of the libido and Lacan's concept of *jouissance*. In keeping with Freud's assertion that there is only one libido, Lacan maintains up to *Encore*, his seminar on feminine *jouissance* and the limits of love, that '*jouissance, insofar as it is sexual, is phallic, which means that it does not relate to the Other as such*' (Lacan, 1962-63: 14). Nonetheless, in the same seminar he claims that there is a specifically feminine *jouissance*, a 'supplementary *jouissance*' (1962-63: 58) of the Other, which is by definition beyond words, yet which is also what poets (the mystics in particular) attempt to put into words.

IV. *Jouissances*, Joyce and Margarita Duras

From here I'd like to compare two writers whose modalities of *jouissance* seem radically opposed, namely James Joyce and Marguerite Duras. As it happens, their relationship with both writing and anxiety also seem radically opposed, which indicates that processes of sexual identification complicate

the way writers relate to their art, more particularly in terms of symbolic and imaginary identifications.

As you know, Joyce's father was and was not the one who wore the pants in the Joyce household. For Lacan, this induced a deficiency of the Name-of-the-Father in young James. Thus for Lacan, James Joyce was a psychotic who succeeded in avoiding a psychotic collapse through his writing. Interestingly enough, in his *Sinthome* Seminar, Lacan focuses on Joyce's youthful 'epiphanies' as instances of 'radical foreclosure', in which 'the real forecloses meaning' (16-03-76). The body of Joyce's writing, Lacan shows, entails a particular relation to language: a destructive refashioning of the symbolic by the unique modality of his *jouissance*. This *jouissance*, I suggest, is a phallic *jouissance* whose primary aim is to fend off anxiety.

In his book on Joyce, Harari shows how it is the obscene that substitutes for anxiety in Joyce's writing, how by a 'singular mise en scene', a montage of scenes, Joyce's writing attains 'beauty paradoxically, by way of obscenity' (2002: 258). This obscenity, Harari emphasizes, provokes disgust, disgust being 'the index of non anxiety' (2002: 259). Of particular relevance to Joyce's fending off of anxiety is that 'disgust or an equivalent sensation bears witness to a disinvestment from the unconscious and the bypassing of the Other (2002: 260)'.

There is, on the other hand, one passage in Lacan's seminar on Joyce that I'd like to draw your attention to. Lacan has just pointed out how fiercely Joyce had always defended his own daughter, a schizophrenic, against the control of the doctors on the ground that she was 'telepathic' (17-02-1976: 17). Joyce, Lacan remarks, attributes to her something that is an extension of what he calls 'his own symptom – namely, that something was imposed on him at the locus of speech'. Lacan is quick to observe that to read Joyce is to bear witness to a continuing process: 'it is hard not to see that a certain relation to speech is increasingly imposed upon him, to the point where he ends up breaking or dissolving speech itself, by breaking it into bits, going beyond phonetic identity'. The passage I'd like to quote focuses on the dialectic between speech and writing, indeed on the effect writing might have on speech:

There is no doubt here a reflection concerning writing. It is through the intermediary of writing that speech breaks down as it imposes itself as such, in a distortion which remains ambiguous – is it a matter of breaking free from the parasite, the parasite of speech, or rather, of being invaded by its phonemic properties, by the polyphony of speech? (17-02-1976: 17)

This doesn't tell us why James Joyce consistently and successfully avoided anxiety or why Lucia succumbed to it. Neither does this tell us why Lucia ended up locked up in a psychiatric hospital when James, who died laughing at his own puns, has become larger than the master signifier in the Joyce industry. This, however, might provide us with a clue as to how writing – and not speech – acts as *suppléance*.

One further question arises here: since father and daughter apparently shared a common symptom, is the fact of their taking diverging paths in the field of speech and language a question of sexuation? As this question is obviously beyond the scope of this paper, since Lucia didn't write, I'd like to invoke another story on a closely related theme: the story of the lolling Lol V. Stein and Jacques Hold, or rather, the story of Lol V. Stein, Jacques Hold and Marguerite Duras. What is so interesting in this story is that Duras initially takes up the pen in the persona of a male narrator: Jacques Hold, to name him. Thus, *The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein* becomes his 'own story of Lol Stein' at one remove with the narrative enacting the ravishing of Lol, i.e., her self-destruction and her rape by the narrator (Duras, 1964: 4). It also exemplifies the split of subjectivity experienced in the act of writing in terms of the sexual relation. It is both violence and impossibility in that it heads straight for the presentation of radical castration as well as the shadow of *das Ding*.

Thus, halfway through the writing of *The Ravishing of Lol Stein*, Marguerite Duras screams in horror. 'This had never happened to me before' she will say later, 'I was writing, and suddenly I heard myself screaming, because I was scared ... I was scared of going mad' (Duras and Porte, 1977: 102). The threat of madness that Duras says she felt as she wrote the book is, it seems to me, provoked by her intense identification with Lol V. Stein in an encounter with the real. A complex identificatory dynamic is established between *l'écrit* and *les cris*, the writing and the scream, the body of the text and the author, with anxiety here functioning as the call of desire away from the *jouissance of the Other at its most intense: the encounter with das Ding*.

It is anxiety that prevents Duras from an imaginary collapse and it is resuming writing that re-anchors her in the symbolic. Here is *suppléance* in process, the performative moment in fiction that explains why Duras invented a name for herself through writing: 'I write to replace myself with the book', says Duras in an interview, to 'relieve myself of my own importance. So that the book can take my place. To destroy myself, spoil, ruin myself in the birth of the book. To become vulgar, public, to lie down in the street' (Vircondelet, 1972: 179). Although it's hard not to think of the contrast between Duras' conception of the writer as whore and Joyce's conception of the artist as god paring his finger nails, their writing clearly partake of two modalities of *suppléance* determined by two distinct modalities of *jouissance*. Joyce 'enjoyed' on the mode of phallic *jouissance* whilst Duras 'enjoyed' more (though not solely) on the Other side.

Thus it is with the threat of psychotic breakdown that anxiety sets in for Duras: faced with Lol Stein who is losing her wits in the book she is scripting more than writing, Duras screams, refusing as she does, albeit at the last minute, to identify with a woman whose only function is to be exchanged, because if she identifies with the woman who is not only expendable and replaceable, but goes mad because of it, it means that Duras is no one. As a woman, she knows she does not exist. As a mad woman, she would not even be the author of her book.

What does Duras' scream teach us, though, apart from pointing to the gap between male and female modalities of *jouissance* (which she defines in terms of oblivion, the self erasure of the writer as whore, and indifference, the self-creation of the omnipotent artist as god-the-man) which make it impossible to get anywhere across the gap? The scream tells us that there is nothing to **hold** on to. The phallus is bogus. There is nothing but the void supporting its own void – the hollowed out ring around the hole inside out. And so the shift from one to the other is a voyage into the impossible, the mad, the real.

Is Duras' scream brought about by the realization that there are two *jouissances* to be joined in a mutual silence, perhaps? For it is clear here that there is a conjunction of phallic *jouissance* involving fantasy and the symbolic aspect of the Other, with a feminine *jouissance* traversing the real of the Other, exceeding the symbolic and hence close to some position of radical destitution. Or is the lack of a lack in the Other the reason for the scream? Confronted with the lack *Lol* cannot find a signifier for, Duras cannot represent. Duras fears it, fears becoming it – *das Ding*, the object cause of anxiety par excellence.

Towards the end of *The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein*, there is an allegorical insert which illustrates the relationship between the split subject of writing as reader and writer; author, critic; man, woman: 'on the shore where swimmers pullulate, there is some commotion, a crowd gathering around something, perhaps a dead dog' (Duras, 1964: 174). In the end, then, it is disgust as the index of non anxiety, indeed in this particular case, of anxiety that has been overcome by the work of the symbolic, which signals the successful work of writing as *suppléance*. Phallic *jouissance* is what guarantees its success.

A Minimalist Glossary

The following definitions of Lacanian terms are grossly simplified: the concepts to which they refer are not only complex, but they also shift during the course of Lacan's teaching. It is hoped, however, that this list of terms will enable the reader who is not familiar with Lacan's work to get the gist of my article.

Borromean knot

So called because the figure is found on the coat of arms of the Borromeo family, the Borromean Knot is a group of three rings which are linked in such a way that if any one of them is cut, all three become separated. In his late seminars, i.e., from Seminar XX onwards, Lacan uses the Borromean knot as a way of illustrating the interdependence of the three orders of the real, the symbolic and the imaginary. This corresponds to a rethinking of the relationship between language and the body in the structuring of the subject.

Castration

A symbolic act which bears on an imaginary object, i.e., the phallus--this is why Lacan writes castration (-j). The castration of the subject occurs in the final phase of the Oedipus Complex, when s/he renounces all attempts at being the object of the mother's desire, thus also giving up a certain *jouissance*. On a more fundamental level, castration may also refer to a state of lack existing in the mother prior to the infant's birth. This lack is evident in the mother's desire, i.e., her own incompleteness, which the subject perceives as a desire for the imaginary phallus.

Das Ding

A Freudian term that Lacan uses in the context of *jouissance* and anxiety. *Das Ding* is the object of desire *par excellence*, i.e., the lost (and forbidden) object of (incestuous) desire that must be continually refound. Because this prehistoric object is forbidden, its perceived closeness causes anxiety. Fortunately, it is inaccessible.

Jouissance

A French word for 'enjoyment'. However, because the French word has a sexual connotation, i.e., orgasm, lacking in the English, it is left in the original in most translations of Lacan's work. In the 60's, Lacan opposes *jouissance* and pleasure, the pleasure principle functioning as a limit to enjoyment, therefore to excess and pain. The term *jouissance* therefore also expresses the paradoxical satisfaction that the subject derives from his symptom and sufferings.

Lack

For Lacan, the term 'lack' is always related to desire. It is a lack that enables desire to arise. It is therefore often understood as being synonymous with castration.

The Name of the Father

Also known as 'paternal metaphor', this term designates the metaphorical, i.e., substitutive, dimension of the Oedipus Complex. It is, as Lacan puts it, 'the support of the symbolic function', the fundamental signifier that confers identity on the subject (by naming and positioning him or her in the symbolic order), signifies the prohibition of incest, and enables signification to proceed. A failure of inscription of this Name of the Father results in psychosis.

Objet (petit) a

Sometimes translated as 'object a', this term ought to remain untranslated as it has the status of an algebraic sign. The symbol *a* denotes the object that can never be attained, being thus the cause of desire rather than that towards which desire tends.

Passage à l'acte

This phrase comes from French psychiatry, which uses it to designate those impulsive acts, of a violent or criminal nature, which sometimes mark the onset of a psychotic episode.

Sinthome / symptom

The term *sinthome* is, as Lacan points out in his 1975-76 seminar on James Joyce, an archaic way of writing what has more recently been spelt *symptome* in French. Lacan reads Joyce's writing as an extended symptom, but uses the archaic form of the term (punning on symptom, saint and St Thomas) to signify Joyce's special relation to language. Indeed, Lacan's thesis is that Joyce managed to avoid psychosis by deploying his art as a supplementary ring in his subjective knot – as that which prevented him from falling apart, as it were.

Suppléance

The fourth term whose addition to the Borromean knot of the real, the imaginary and the symbolic, allows the subject to cohere and prevents the onset of psychosis. Writing, art, philosophy, mathematics, but also alcohol and drug addiction, may arguably fulfil this function of supplement. Writing, and thus a firmer anchoring into the symbolic, however, seems to guarantee better success than more abstract forms of suppletion (see *A Beautiful Mind*).

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