

III

The function of the written¹

THE UNCONSCIOUS IS WHAT IS READ.

ON THE USE OF LETTERS.

S/S.

ONTOLOGY, THE MASTER'S DISCOURSE.

SPEAKING OF FUCKING.

THE UNREADABLE.

I am going to enter very slowly into what I have reserved for you today, which, before beginning, strikes me as rather reckless. It has to do with the way in which we must situate the function of the written in analytic discourse.

There is an anecdote to be related here, namely, that one day, on the cover of a collection I brought out – *pubellication*, as I called it² – I found nothing better to write than the word *Écrits*.

It is rather well known that those *Écrits* cannot be read easily. I can make a little autobiographical admission – that is exactly what I thought. I thought, perhaps it goes that far, I thought they were not meant to be read. That's a good start.

1

A letter is something that is read.³ It even seems to be designed as a sort of extension (*prolongement*) of the word. It is read (*ça se lit*) and literally at that. But it is not the same thing to read a letter as it is to read. It is quite clear that, in analytic discourse, what is involved is but that – that which is read, that which is read beyond what you have incited the subject to say, which, as I emphasized the last time, is not so much to say everything⁴

¹ What I am translating here as “the written” is “*l'écrit*” which can also mean writing, a text (as in Lacan's *Écrits*, i.e., his writings), etc. It is not always easily distinguished here from *écriture*, writing, but should not be confused with the act or fact of writing, as it refers specifically to that which *has already been written*. In the few cases in which I render it as “writing,” I provide the French in brackets.

² *Pubellication* is a condensation of *pubelle*, garbage can (or dustbin), and *publication*, publication. It can perhaps also be seen to contain *embeller*, to beautify, and other words as well.

³ Or “A letter is something that can be read” or “A letter is something you read”. *La lettre, ça se lit*.

⁴ In the context of the last chapter, I translated this *tout dire* as to “say it all.”

as to say anything, without worrying about saying something stupid (*des bêtises*).

That assumes that we develop the dimension [of stupidity], but it cannot be developed without the act of saying.⁵ What is the dimension of stupidity? Stupidity, at least the stupidity one can proffer, doesn't go far. In common discourse, it stops short.

That is what I check when I look back, which I never do without trembling, at what I have proffered in the past. That always makes me awfully afraid, afraid of having said something stupid, in other words, something that, due to what I am now putting forward, I might consider not to hold up.

Thanks to someone who is writing up this Seminar – the first year at the *École normale* will be coming out soon⁶ – I was able to get the sense, which I encounter sometimes when put to the test, that what I put forward that year was not as stupid as all that, and at least wasn't so stupid as to have stopped me from putting forward other things that seem to me, because that's where I'm at now, to hold water.

Nevertheless, this “rereading oneself” (*se relire*) represents a dimension that must be situated in relation to what is, with respect to analytic discourse, the function of that which is read (*ce qui se lit*).

Analytic discourse has a privilege in this regard. That is what I began from in what constitutes a crucial date for me in what I am teaching – it is perhaps not so much on the “I” that emphasis must be placed, namely, concerning what “I” can proffer, as on the “from” (*de*), in other words, on from whence comes the teaching of which I am the effect. Since then, I have grounded analytic discourse on the basis of a precise articulation, which can be written on the blackboard with four letters, two bars, and five lines that connect up each of the letters two by two. One of these lines – since there are four letters, there should be six lines – is missing.

This writing (*écriture*)⁷ stemmed from an initial reminder, namely, that analytic discourse is a new kind of relation based only on what functions as speech, in something one may define as a field. “Function and Field,” I wrote, “of Speech and Language,” I ended, “in Psychoanaly-

⁵ *Sans le dire* could also mean “without saying so.”

⁶ Lacan is referring here to Seminar XI, published in English as *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Norton, 1978). The text was edited by Jacques-Alain Miller and published by *Éditions du Seuil* in 1973.

⁷ In English, we would normally refer to the kind of symbolism Lacan refers to here (the analyst's discourse whose written formulation was given in Chapter II) and also later in this chapter as *notation* or *symbols*, not as a writing, much less as a written or what is written. Given, however, Lacan's discussion in this chapter, I have opted to stretch the English use of the words writing and written, rather than always strive for the best-sounding English translation. Lacan himself uses the term “notation” later in this chapter.

sis"⁸ — that amounted to designating what constitutes the originality of this discourse, which is not the same as a certain number of others that serve specific purposes (*qui font office*), and that, due to this very fact, I qualify as official discourses (*discours officiels*). The point is to discern the purpose (*office*) of analytic discourse, and to render it, if not official, at least officialing.

It is in this discourse that we must indicate what the function of the written in analytic discourse may be, if it is, indeed, specific.

To allow for the explanation of the functions of this discourse, I put forward the use of a certain number of letters. First of all, *a*, which I call "object," but which, nevertheless, is but a letter. Then *A*,⁹ that I make function in that aspect of the proposition that takes only the form of a written formula,¹⁰ and that is produced by mathematical logic. I designate thereby that which is first of all a locus, a place. I called it "the locus of the Other" (*le lieu de l'Autre*).¹¹

In what respect can a letter serve to designate a locus? It is clear that there is something that is not quite right here. When you open, for example, to the first page of what was finally collected in the form of a definitive edition entitled *Theory of Sets*,¹² bearing the name of a fictitious author, Nicolas Bourbaki, what you see is the putting into play of a certain number of logical signs. One of them designates the function of "place" as such. It is written as a little square: □.

Thus, I wasn't making a strict use of the letter when I said that the locus of the Other was symbolized by the letter *A*. On the contrary, I marked it by redoubling it with the *S* that means signifier here, signifier of *A* insofar as the latter is barred: *S(A)*. I thereby added a dimension to *A*'s locus, showing that qua locus it does not hold up, that there is a fault, hole, or loss therein. Object *a* comes to function with respect to that loss. That is something which is quite essential to the function of language.

Lastly, I used the letter ϕ , to be distinguished from the merely signifying function that had been promoted in analytic theory up until then with the

term "phallus." It is something original whose true import I am specifying today as being indicated by its very writing.¹³

If these three letters are different, it is because they do not have the same function.

To once again take up the thread of analytic discourse, we must now discern what these letters introduce into the function of the signifier.

2

The written is in no way in the same register or made of the same stuff, if you'll allow me this expression, as the signifier.

The signifier is a dimension that was introduced by linguistics. Linguistics, in the field in which speech is produced, is not self-evident (*ne va pas de soi*).¹⁴ A discourse sustains it, which is scientific discourse. Linguistics introduces into speech a dissociation thanks to which the distinction between signifier and signified is grounded. It divides up what seems to be self-evident, which is that when one speaks, one's speech signifies, bringing with it the signified, and, still further, is only based, up to a certain point, on the function of signification.

Distinguishing the dimension of the signifier only takes on importance when it is posited that what you hear, in the auditory sense of the term, bears no relation whatsoever to what it signifies. That is an act that is instituted only through a discourse, scientific discourse. And it is not self-evident. Indeed, it is so scarcely self-evident that a whole discourse — which does not flow from a bad pen, since it is the *Crayfish*, by none other than Plato — results from the endeavor to show that there must be a relationship and that the signifier in and of itself means something. This attempt, which we can qualify from our vantage point as desperate, is marked by failure, because another discourse, scientific discourse, due to its very institution — in a way whose history we need not probe here — gives us the following: that the signifier is posited only insofar as it has no relation to the signified.

The very terms we use to talk about it are still slippery. A linguist as discerning as Ferdinand de Saussure speaks of arbitrariness. That is tantamount to slipping, slipping into another discourse, the master's discourse, to call a spade a spade. Arbitrariness is not a suitable term here.

When we develop a discourse, if we are to remain within its field and not

⁸ This is the title of Lacan's well-known Rome discourse from 1953 included in *Écrits*.

⁹ In this Seminar (as elsewhere), I adopt the French convention of using *A* for Other (*Autre*) instead of *O*, because the barred Other, when written \emptyset , is easily confused with the empty set, $\{\emptyset\}$.

¹⁰ The French here strikes me as somewhat ambiguous: *ce qui de la proposition n'a pris que formule écrite*.

¹¹ This could also be translated as "the Other's locus" or "the Other as locus."

¹² Originally published in French as *Éléments de mathématique, Théorie des ensembles* (Paris: Hermann), it was translated into English and published as *Elements of Mathematics: Theory of Sets* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1968).

¹³ Lacan's phraseology is quite complicated here: *que je spécifie aujourd'hui d'être précisé dans son relief par l'écrit même*.

¹⁴ The expression Lacan uses here, *aller de soi*, variants of which are repeated throughout the next few paragraphs, can generally be translated as "to be self-evident," but more literally means to "go it alone," "stand alone," or "require no outside support." Here linguistics is sustained by another discourse, scientific discourse.

fall back into another, we must always try to give it its own consistency and not step outside of it except advisedly. This vigilance is all the more necessary when what is at stake is what constitutes a discourse (*quand il s'agit de ce qu'est un discours*). To say that the signifier is arbitrary does not have the same import as to simply say that it bears no relation to its meaning effect, for the former involves slipping into another reference.

The word "reference," in this case, can only be situated on the basis of what discourse constitutes by way of a link (*lien*). The signifier as such refers to nothing if not to a discourse, in other words, a mode of functioning or a utilization of language qua link.

We must still indicate here what this link means. The link — we can but turn to this right away — is a link between those who speak. You can immediately see where we are headed — it's not just anyone who speaks, of course; it's beings, beings we are used to qualifying as "living," and it would, perhaps, be rather difficult to exclude the dimension of life from those who speak. But we immediately realize that this dimension simultaneously brings in that of death, and that a radical signifying ambiguity results from this. The sole function on the basis of which life can be defined, namely, the reproduction of a body, can itself be characterized neither by life nor by death, since reproduction as such, insofar as it is sexual (*sexuée*), involves both life and death.

Already, by merely swimming with the tide of analytic discourse, we have made a jump known as a "world view" (*conception du monde*), which to us must nevertheless be the funniest thing going. The term "world view" supposes a discourse — that of philosophy — that is entirely different from ours.

If we leave behind philosophical discourse, nothing is less certain than the existence of a world. One can only laugh when one hears people claim that analytic discourse involves something on the order of such a conception.

I would go even further — putting forward such a term to designate Marxism is also a joke. Marxism does not seem to me to be able to pass for a world view. The statement of what Marx says (*L'énormé de ce que dit Marx*) runs counter to that in all sorts of striking ways. Marxism is something else, something I will call a gospel. It is the announcement that history is instating another dimension of discourse and opening up the possibility of completely subverting the function of discourse as such and of philosophical discourse, strictly speaking, insofar as a world view is based upon the latter.

Generally speaking, language proves to be a field much richer in resources than if it were merely the field in which philosophical discourse has inscribed itself over the course of time. But certain reference points have been enunciated by that discourse that are difficult to completely elim-

inate from any use of language. That is why there is nothing easier than to fall back into what I ironically called a world view, but which has a more moderate and more precise name: ontology.

Ontology is what highlighted in language the use of the copula, isolating it as a signifier.¹⁵ To dwell on the verb "to be" — a verb that is not even, in the complete field of the diversity of languages, employed in a way we could qualify as universal — to produce it as such is a highly risky enterprise.

In order to exorcise it, it might perhaps suffice to suggest that when we say about anything whatsoever that it is what it is, nothing in any way obliges us to isolate the verb "to be." That is pronounced "it is what it is" (*c'est ce que c'est*), and it could just as well be written, "i3izwadi3iz" (*seskésé*). In this use of the copula, we would see nothing at all. We would see nothing whatsoever if a discourse, the discourse of the master, *m'être*,¹⁶ didn't emphasize the verb "to be" (*être*).

That is what Aristotle himself thinks about twice before propounding since, to designate the being he juxtaposes to $\tau\acute{o} \tau\acute{i} \acute{\epsilon}\sigma\tau\alpha$, that is, to quiddity or what it is, he goes so far as to employ the following, $\tau\acute{o} \tau\acute{i} \tilde{\eta}\nu \acute{\epsilon}\tilde{\iota}\nu\alpha\iota$ — what would have happened if that which was to be had simply come to be.¹⁷ It seems that the pedicle¹⁸ is conserved here that allows us to situate from whence this discourse on being is produced — it's quite simply being at someone's heel, being at someone's beck and call — what would have been if you had understood what I ordered you to do.¹⁹

¹⁵ *Comme signifiant* could also mean "as signifying."

¹⁶ *Maître*, "master," and *m'être* are generally pronounced identically in French. The latter literally means "to be myself," but in certain expressions — e.g., *je me souviens de m'être aperçu que . . .* — "I recall having noticed that . . ." — it is simply part and parcel of a reflexive construction.

Lacan's discussion here is continued in Seminar XXI (*Les non-dupes errent*, January 15, 1974), where Lacan says, "[S]peaking being . . . is a pleonasm, because there is only being due to speaking; were it not for the verb 'to be,' there would be no being at all."

¹⁷ The Greek expressions here can be found in many passages in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*; see, for example, Book V, Chapter 18, 1022a25–27, where $\tau\acute{o} \tau\acute{i} \tilde{\eta}\nu \acute{\epsilon}\tilde{\iota}\nu\alpha\iota$ is translated by W. D. Ross as "what it was to be." (Richard Hope translates it as "what it means to be.") Ross more generally translates it as "essence." Lacan's French here reads as follows: *ce qui se serait produit si était venu à être, tout court, ce qui était à être*. This could also be rendered: "what would have been produced if that which should have been had come into Being."

¹⁸ The *pédicelle* ("pedicle," "pedicel," or "peduncle") — a term that has many meanings in anatomy, botany, and zoology, and whose root is *pes*, "foot" — in question here is most likely the Greek word $\tilde{\eta}\nu$ (if or unless), which is often used in subjunctive clauses and as part of a negation (with $\mu\tilde{\eta}$). It is thus similar to the French *ne* when used as an "expletive" (for example, in *grandre qu'il ne vienne*), which Lacan discusses in great detail in Seminar IX, *Identification*. See also Lacan's use of *pédicelle* in Seminar XIX (March 15, 1972).

¹⁹ The French here is far more polyvalent: *c'est tout simplement l'être à la botte, l'être aux ordres, ce qui allait être si tu avais entendu ce que je t'ordonne*. The *allait être* involves an imperfect tense, and Lacan often plays on the French imperfect, since it

Every dimension of being is produced in the wake of the master's discourse – the discourse of he who, proffering the signifier, expects therefrom one of its link effects that must not be neglected, which is related to the fact that the signifier commands. The signifier is, first and foremost, imperative. How is one to return, if not on the basis of a peculiar (*spéciale*) discourse, to a prediscursive reality? That is the dream – the dream behind every conception (*idée*) of knowledge. But it is also what must be considered mythical. There's no such thing as a prediscursive reality. Every reality is founded and defined by a discourse.

That is why it is important for us to realize what analytic discourse is made of, and not to misrecognize the following, which no doubt has but a limited place therein, that we speak in analytic discourse about what the verb "to fuck" (*foutre*) enunciates perfectly well. We speak therein of fucking,²⁰ and we say that it's not working out (*ça ne va pas*).²¹

That is an important part of what is confided in analytic discourse, but it is worth highlighting that analytic discourse does not have exclusivity in this regard. For that is also what is expressed in what I earlier referred to as "current discourse" (*discours courant*). Let us write that as "*disque-ourcourant*" [pronounced in the same way as *discours courant*, but *disque* means record or disk], *disque aussi hors-champ*, *hors jeu de tout discours* [a disk that is also or so very outside of the field, out of the game, or beyond the rules of all discourse], *donc disque tout court* [thus, just a disk] – it goes around and around for nothing, quite precisely. The disk is found in the very field on the basis of which all discourses are specified and where they all drown, where each and every one of them is just as capable of enunciating as much of the field as the others, but due to a concern with what I will call, for very good reasons, "decency" (*décente*),²² does so – well – as little as possible.

What constitutes the basis of life, in effect, is that for everything having to do with the relations between men and women, what is called collectivity, it's not working out (*ça ne va pas*). It's not working out, and the whole world talks about it, and a large part of our activity is taken up with saying so.

Nevertheless, there is nothing serious if not what is organized in another way as discourse. That includes the fact that this relationship, this sexual

can mean what "was going to be," "was about to be," or "would have been" if The French thus moves from an imperfect to a pluperfect (*avais entendu*, meaning "heard" or "understood," and perhaps even "heeded" or "agreed to" here) and then to a present tense (what I "order" or "am ordering" you to do).

²⁰ In the French, Lacan specifies here that he is talking about the verb form of *foutre* by referring to the English verb, "to fuck"; as a noun, *foutre* means "cum."

²¹ This elementary French expression can be translated in a number of other ways as well: "it's no good," "it's not going well," etc.

²² *Décente* is a homonym for *des sens*, meanings.

relationship, insofar as it's not working out, works out anyway (*il va quand même*) – thanks to a certain number of conventions, prohibitions, and inhibitions that are the effect of language and can only be taken from that fabric and register. There isn't the slightest prediscursive reality, for the very fine reason that what constitutes a collectivity – what I called men, women, and children – means nothing qua prediscursive reality. Men, women, and children are but signifiers.

A man is nothing but a signifier. A woman seeks out a man qua signifier (*au titre de signifiant*). A man seeks out a woman qua – and this will strike you as odd – that which can only be situated through discourse, since, if what I claim is true – namely, that woman is not-whole – there is always something in her that escapes discourse.

3

What we need to know is what, in a discourse, is produced by the effect of the written. As you perhaps know – you know it in any case if you read what I write – the fact that linguistics has distinguished the signifier and the signified is not the whole story. Perhaps that seems self-evident to you. But it is precisely by considering things to be self-evident that we see nothing of what is right before our eyes, before our eyes concerning the written. Linguistics has not simply distinguished the signified from the signifier. If there is something that can introduce us to the dimension of the written as such, it is the realization that the signified has nothing to do with the ears, but only with reading – the reading of the signifiers we hear.²³ The signified is not what you hear. What you hear is the signifier. The signified is the effect of the signifier.

One can distinguish here something that is but the effect of discourse, of discourse as such – in other words, of something that already functions qua link. Let us take things at the level of a writing (*un écrit*) that is itself the effect of a discourse, scientific discourse, namely the writing (*l'écrit*) S, designed to connote the place of the signifier, and s with which the signified is connoted as a place. Place as a function is created only by discourse itself. "Places everyone!"²⁴ – that functions only in discourse. Anyway, between

the two, S and s, there is a bar, $\frac{S}{s}$.

²³ The French here is *la lecture de ce qu'on entend de signifiants*, which can be translated literally as, "the reading of what one hears qua signifier (or qua signifying)"; the sentences that follow in the text are what allow for the translation I have provided here.

²⁴ The French here, *chacun à sa place*, literally means "everyone in his place."

It doesn't look like anything when you write a bar in order to explain things. This word, "explain," is of the utmost importance because there ain't nothing you can understand in a bar, even when it is reserved for signifying negation.²⁵

It is very difficult to understand what negation means. If you look at it a bit closely, you realize in particular that there is a wide variety of negations that it is quite impossible to cover with the same concept. The negation of existence, for example, is not at all the same as the negation of totality.²⁶

There is something that is even more certain: adding a bar to the notation S and s is already a bit superfluous and even futile, insofar as what it brings out is already indicated by the distance of what is written.²⁷ The bar, like everything involving what is written, is based only on the following — what is written is not to be understood.

That is why you are not obliged to understand my writings. If you don't understand them, so much the better — that will give you the opportunity to explain them.

It's the same with the bar. The bar is precisely the point at which, in every use of language, writing (*l'écrit*) may be produced. If, in Saussure's work itself, S is above s, that is, over the bar, it is because the effects of the unconscious have no basis without this bar — that is what I was able to show you in "The Instance of the Letter," included in my *Écrits*, in a way that is written (*qui s'écrit*), nothing more.

Indeed, were it not for this bar nothing about language could be explained by linguistics. Were it not for this bar above which there are signifiers that pass, you could not see that signifiers are injected into the signified.²⁸

Were there no analytic discourse, you would continue to speak like bird-brains, singing the "current disk" (*disque-ourcourant*),²⁹ making the disk go around, that disk that turns because "there's no such thing as a sexual relationship" — a formulation that can only be articulated thanks to the entire

²⁵ See Chapter VII, where Lacan uses a bar over the different "quantifiers" to signify negation.

²⁶ See Chapter VII, where Lacan introduces the existential and universal quantifiers.

²⁷ Presumably, the distance between the S and s in the notation \bar{S} .

²⁸ Lacan's French here, *vous ne pourriez voir que du signifiant s'injecte dans le signifié*, is rendered a bit odd because Lacan doesn't say a signifier or several signifiers, but rather some signifier, in the sense in which we speak in English about "some bread" or "some water," in other words, as an unquantifiable substance. Here, signifier is injected into the signified, apparently like fuel is injected into an engine.

²⁹ "Disk" (*disque*) should be understood here primarily in the sense of a phonograph record.

edifice of analytic discourse, and that I have been drumming into you for quite some time.

But drumming it into you, I must nevertheless explain it — it is based only on the written in the sense that the sexual relationship cannot be written (*ne peut pas s'écrire*). Everything that is written stems from the fact that it will forever be impossible to write, as such, the sexual relationship. It is on that basis that there is a certain effect of discourse, which is called writing.

One could, at a pinch, write $x R y$, and say x is man, y is woman, and R is the sexual relationship. Why not? The only problem is that it's stupid, because what is based on the signifier function (*la fonction de signifiant*)³⁰ of "man" and "woman" are mere signifiers that are altogether related to the "current" (*ourcourant*)³¹ use of language. If there is a discourse that demonstrates that to you, it is certainly analytic discourse, because it brings into play the fact that woman will never be taken up except *quoad matrem*. Woman serves a function in the sexual relationship only qua mother.

Those are overall truths (*vérités massives*), but they will lead us further. Thanks to what? Thanks to writing. Writing will not object to this first approximation since it is in this way that writing will show that woman's jouissance is based on a supplementation of this not-whole (*une suppléance de ce pas-tout*). She finds the cork³² for this jouissance [based on the fact] that she is not-whole³³ — in other words, that makes her absent from herself somewhere, absent as subject — in the a constituted by her child.

As for x — in other words, what man would be if the sexual relationship could be written in a sustainable way, a way that is sustainable in a discourse — man is but a signifier because where he comes into play as a signifier, he comes in only *quoad castrationem*, in other words, insofar as he has a relation to phallic jouissance. The upshot being that as soon as a discourse, analytic discourse, seriously took up this question and posited that the precondition of what is written is that it be sustained by a discourse, everything fell apart. Now you'll never be able to write the sexual relationship — write

³⁰ This ambiguous expression could also arguably be translated as "signifying function" or "function as signifier."

³¹ *Courcourant* involves a doubling of the first syllable of *courant*, "current" (in all senses of the term), making it a bit singsong-like. *Cour* alone is courtyard, also suggesting that this is a courtyard or backyard use of language. *Cou cou* is a sound birds (or birdbrains) make in French, and a *coucou* is a cuckoo (bird or clock). *Coucou* is also what you say to a little baby to say "peek-a-boo!" *Courrant* means running, giving the additional sense of a use of language that runs (drives?) on and on. *Courcourant* is derived from the neologism Lacan provided two paragraphs back, *disque-ourcourant*, by lopping off the "dis."

³² *Bouchon*, which I have translated here as "cork," can also mean "stopper" or "plug"; it seems to put a stop here to this form of jouissance.

³³ Or "this jouissance, which she has owing to the fact of not being whole . . ." or "due to her not being whole . . ."

it with a true writing (*écriture*), insofar as the written is that aspect of language that is conditioned by a discourse.

4

The letter is, radically speaking, an effect of discourse.

What is nice about what I tell you – don't you agree? – is that it's always the same thing. Not that I repeat myself, that's not the point. It's that what I said before takes on meaning afterward.

The first time, as far as I recall, that I spoke of the letter – it must have been some fifteen years ago, somewhere at Sainte-Anne (Hospital) – I mentioned a fact known to everyone who reads a little, which is not the case for everyone, that a certain Sir Flinders Petrie believed he had discovered that the letters of the Phoenician alphabet existed well before the time of Phoenicia on small Egyptian pottery where they served as manufacturers' marks. That means that the letter first emerged from the market, which is typically an effect of discourse, before anyone dreamt of using letters to do what? Something that has nothing to do with the connotation of the signifier, but that elaborates and perfects it.

We should approach things at the level of the history of each language. It is clear that the letters which upset us so much that we call them, God only knows why, by a different name, "characters," to wit, Chinese letters, emerged from very ancient Chinese discourse in a way that was very different from the way in which our letters emerged. Emerging from analytic discourse, the letters I bring out here have a different value from those that can emerge from set theory. They use one makes of them differ, but nevertheless – and this is what is of interest – they are not without converging in some respect. Any effect of discourse is good in the sense that it is constituted by the letter.

All of that is but a first sketch that I will have the opportunity to develop by distinguishing the use of letters in algebra from the use of letters in set theory. For the time being, I would simply like to point out the following – the world, the world is in [a state of] decomposition, thank God. We see that the world no longer stands up, because even in scientific discourse it is clear that there isn't the slightest world. As soon as you can add something called a "quark" to atoms and have that become the true thread of scientific discourse, you must realize that we are dealing with something other than a world.

You must sit down and read a little work by writers, not of your era – I won't tell you to read Philippe Sollers, who is unreadable, like me as a matter of fact – but you could read Joyce, for example. You will see therein how language is perfected when it knows how to play with writing.

I can agree that Joyce's work is not readable – it is certainly not translatable into Chinese. What happens in Joyce's work? The signifier stuffs (*truffer*)³⁴ the signified. It is because the signifiers fit together, combine, and concertina – read *Finnegans Wake* – that something is produced by way of meaning (*comme signifié*) that may seem enigmatic, but is clearly what is closest to what we analysts, thanks to analytic discourse, have to read – slips of the tongue (*lapsus*).³⁵ It is as slips that they signify something, in other words, that they can be read in an infinite number of different ways. But it is precisely for that reason that they are difficult to read, are read awry, or not read at all. But doesn't this dimension of "being read" (*se lire*) suffice to show that we are in the register of analytic discourse?

What is at stake in analytic discourse is always the following – you give a different reading to the signifiers that are enunciated (*ce qui s'énonce de signifiant*) than what they signify.³⁶

To make myself understood, I will take a reference you read in the great book of the world. Consider the flight of a bee. A bee goes from flower to flower gathering nectar. What you discover is that, at the tip of its feet, the bee transports pollen from one flower onto the pistil of another flower. That is what you read in the flight of the bee. In the flight of a bird that flies close to the ground – you call that a flight, but in reality it is a group at a certain level – you read that there is going to be a storm. But do they read? Does the bee read that it serves a function in the reproduction of phanerogamic plants? Does the bird read the portent of fortune, as people used to say – in other words, the rempest?

That is the whole question. It cannot be ruled out, after all, that a swallow reads the tempest, but it is not terribly certain either.

In your analytic discourse, you assume that the subject of the unconscious knows how to read. And this business of the unconscious is nothing other than that. Not only do you assume that it knows how to read, but you assume that it can learn how to read.

The only problem is that what you teach it to read has absolutely nothing to do, in any case, with what you can write of it.

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³⁴ *Truffer* literally means to garnish with truffles; figuratively it means to stuff, land, fill, or pepper.

³⁵ *Lapsus* is the usual French term for the broad Freudian category, "parapraxis," including slips of the tongue and of the pen, forgetting, and so on.

³⁶ Lacan's complicated phraseology would have us translate: "you give a different reading to what is enunciated qua signifier than what it signifies."