

Visible Language: Freud's Imprint

Mary Lydon

*It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances.
The mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible.*

– Oscar Wilde, in a letter

Wilde's aim is here as always true, which is not to say that it is straight. Rather it is by virtue of a certain obliquity, one might call it a bias, that he hits the mark. Privileging looks (the word is to be taken in both its verbal and nominative functions, subsuming subject and object) Wilde runs the risk of being taken amiss, his obliquity rewarded by the obliquity that the earnest (themselves pledged to depth) heap on the superficial. Yet the point of his trope is not that it denies mystery, what is hidden, the figurative, but rather that it affirms the presence of the mystery, the figure in the appearance.

And it is perhaps Wilde's most brilliant stroke to have embodied the figurative capacity of appearance in a figure of speech – paradox – which has been described as “a statement which seems untrue but proves valid under close inspection,” or again as a “kind of indirection.”¹ (Obliquity?) It is in seeing and being seen that the mystery of the world resides, Wilde insists, and not in being seen through. As Heidegger has it, “Circumspection discovers.”

It seems to me that the notion of visible language is entirely consonant with this view, and that “depth psychology” notwithstanding, the same might be claimed for psychoanalysis as elaborated by Freud: a practice equally preoccupied with appearance, with the sign (clinical, linguistic, alphabetical) with the “facade”² of the dream and the hysterical symptom, a practice which focuses on the “visible fictions”³ of the analysand's reported speech (*oratio obliqua*), aiming, by the indirections of dream-work and story “to find directions out.”

Language has rarely been more visible than in the tics, the paralyzes, the coughs, the false pregnancies, the *arc de cercle* of the hysteric: “Hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences”⁴ Freud wrote of his first patients, a formula he was later obliged to revise as follows: “Hysterical symptoms are not attached to actual memories, but to fantasies erected on the basis of memories.”⁵ (The writing of the hysteric is thus both inscription and fiction.) Speechless (aphonia is a classic symptom of hysteria) but not unlettered, Frau Emmy von N., Anna O., Miss Lucy R., et al (how gratifying, in the present context, that Freud gave

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Author's address: Department of Comparative Literature, University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI 53201

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to each a “discreet and ladylike letter of the alphabet”⁶) recorded their painful pseudo-memories on what Joyce called “the only foolscap available,” their own bodies.

Writing of those “mnemonic symbols” that are the hysteric’s symptoms, Freud likened them to “the monuments and memorials with which large cities are adorned,”⁷ citing the Gothic column at Charing Cross in London as an example. The last in a series of monuments punctuating (appropriately *nachträglich*, after the event) the passage of Queen Eleanor’s funeral cortege through the city, Charing Cross derives its name, Freud points out, from the French “*chère reine*” (“dear queen”). The association with Eleanor Honig Skoller’s essay, which would graph New York City as the network of Frank O’Hara’s memory traces, is too euphonious to be resisted, while the same train of thought might lead to the London architect par excellence, Sir Christopher Wren (*reine*?), whose epitaph, inscribed over the interior of the North Door of St. Paul’s, reads: “Si monumentum requiris, circumspice” (“If you would see his monument, look around”) – an invitation to circumspection, if not to being circumspect. Thus, in Jacques Lacan’s phrase, does “the ring of meaning fle[e] from our grasp along the verbal thread,”⁸ and we are both captives of and captivated by the signifying chain.

“(It is a rule of psychoanalytic technique that an internal connection which is still undisclosed will announce its presence by means of a contiguity – a temporal proximity – of associations” writes Freud, “just as in writing, if “a” and “b” are put side by side, it means that the syllable ‘ab’ is to be formed out of them).”⁹ I would add that the syllable “ab” is also a synecdoche for the entire twenty-six letters (alpha beta: alphabet) and that furthermore, it is a precedent established in rational thought that “a” and “b” are instrumental in disclosing the properties of those unknown quantities traditionally designated “x” and “y”. Freud’s algebra obeys the laws of poetry rather than the formulae of logic, however, and in this it reflects the structure of the unknown quantity it seeks to (de)cipher: the unconscious. That is the view of Jacques Lacan, whose seminal essay “The agency of the letter in the unconscious, or reason since Freud” applies a Freudian torque to the myth by which the French, as heirs of Descartes and the Enlightenment, pretend to a privileged relationship with Reason.

Re-reading Freud across the structural linguistics of Saussure, Lacan dwells on the insistence of the letter (that is to say, visible language) in the unconscious, and takes aim at Descartes. Echoing the poet Rimbaud, as Andrew J. McKenna demonstrates, Lacan rails at the *ergo* of the *cogito* for positing an autonomous ego, whereas (so

poet and psychoanalyst would claim) “‘Je’ est un autre,” “‘I’ is another.” The grammatical dislocation of the formula is nothing less than the visible sign of that riven self which it articulates. After Freud’s mapping of the unconscious, Lacan avers, any claim that we control language in pursuit of our reasonable purposes must be null and void. Far from being the tool of rational humanity, he declares, language is rather a Heraclitean flux which pre-exists us, into which we must leap, yet in which we already have a berth, if only nominally, in name. As Lacan formulates it: “Thus the subject, too, if he can appear to be the slave of language is all the more so of a discourse in the universal movement in which his place is already inscribed at birth, if only by virtue of his proper name” (148).

But as AJMcK (himself, like everyone, a slave to the letter) unwittingly points out, “one’s aim, in seeking out the author’s intention, would always be amiss”: that is to say, oblique, on the bias. The trajectory of the Oedipal desire, which aims at origin, is deflected onto another target, woman – a miss, represented in the idiom of George H. Bauer’s essay as the “feminine third eye,” both letter O and zero. Are we not, as Lacan insists, “at the mercy of a thread woven with allusions, quotations, puns and equivocations”? (169) I suggest that we follow this particular thread on a detour around Lawrence Sterne, since there is an argument to be made for *Tristram Shandy* as an embodiment not only of visible language but also of Lacanian theory, both, of course, *avant la lettre*.

GHB takes as his point of departure Robbe-Grillet’s triangle in *Souvenirs d’un triangle d’or*, describing it as “three-legged, a cauldron, an easel, a tripod, a stool on which the sybil sits to speak oracles. . . .” Robbe-Grillet’s triangle becomes in GHB’s reading a vantage point from which to view the V, the lady as “Delta, opening, door surmounted by triangle and O eye.” But the position has already been occupied by Sterne, who writes in *Tristram Shandy* of the “Argumentum Tripodium [the argument to the third leg] which is never used but by the woman against the man; – and the Argumentum ad Rem [the argument to the thing in hand] which contrary-wise is made use of by the man only against the woman. . . .”¹⁰

The double entendre here which takes visible form in the letter (or more accurately, number, hence, as EHS points out, poetry) of Robbe-Grillet’s text as GHB recounts it, might risk being taken amiss. Like psychoanalysis itself it might be dismissed as mere sexual innuendo tricked out as logic, a foe disguised in Flanders lace. But “reason since Freud” takes things at once more and less literally than the Cartesian version. Thus Sterne’s “Argumentum ad Rem,” when read across

"The agency of the letter," is seen to embody all the pathos of the human relationship to language, a relationship that mirrors the splitting of the subject as s/he comes under the rule of the signifier. What is at stake is no less than "the possibility I have, precisely in so far as I have this language in common with other subjects, that is to say, in so far as it exists as a language, to use it in order to signify *something quite other* than what it says" (154). In other words, the argument to the thing in hand could equally well be called the argument to the O, the no thing, as Lacan, with his customary virtuosity demonstrates:

One cannot go further along this line of thought than to demonstrate that no signification can be sustained other than by reference to another signification. . . . If we try to grasp in language the constitution of the object, we cannot fail to notice that this constitution is to be found only at the level of the concept, a very different thing from a simple nominative, and that the *thing*, when reduced to the noun, breaks into the double, divergent beam of the 'cause' (*causa*) in which it has taken shelter in the French word *chose*, and the nothing (*rien*) to which it had abandoned its Latin dress (*rem*). (150)

It is from this *faille* (at once fault and fabric, cloth, material) that styles are fashioned. Looks are everything. Thus the cut of the double-breasted jacket worn by *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis* catches Jane Gallop's practised eye and the *clinamen* of sexuality, propped against the mother's bosom, becomes visible in the crossing, the obliquity, of the letter "chi," χ . (JG's text is utopian, in the Freudian sense, which is that the truth never appears where we expect to find it.) In the same line of sexual haute couture, the work of Defoe's pen, busy at fashioning a dress in which Moll Flanders is "fit to be seen," prompts Susanna Bartmann to ask, echoing Freud, "How that strange being the poet comes by his material," and to conclude, as Freud did, that he weaves it from the string or the thread of a wish, an operation that is transferred onto the surface of the page as a spelling out of the "specular name." As SB discovers, for Daniel Defoe to become Moll Flanders, his one "L" must subsume her three, and the letters left over from this imperfect anagram yield "MRS," and "I," locus of both subject and gaze. But the "divergent beam" of the I/eye reveals an abyss. "It is the abyss opened up at the thought that a thought should make itself heard in the abyss that provoked resistance to psychoanalysis from the outset," Lacan writes, "And not, as is commonly said, the emphasis on man's sexuality" (170). Sanford S. Ames's essay, a variation on this theme, might be read as the question of sexuality *mise-en-abîme*. "Is there anyone there?" the lover asks, "any *one*." "Is it *you*, dear?"

“Can I count on your pleasure?” Knowledge of the Other can only be skin-deep, “à fleur de peau.” Momus’s glass is unavailable to us. Had it been, according to Sterne,

nothing more would have been wanting, in order to have taken a man’s character, but to have taken a chair and gone softly, as you would to a dioptrical bee-hive, and look’d in, – viewed the soul stark naked; – observ’d all her motions, – her machinations; – traced all her maggots from their first engendering to their crawling forth; – watched her loose in her frisks, her gambols, her capricios; and after some notice of her more solemn deportment, consequent upon such frisks etc. – then taken your pen and ink and set down nothing but what you had seen and could have sworn to: but this is an advantage not to be had by the biographer in this planet. . . .¹¹

In vain the son strikes the bow (“lance un coup d’archet”) as Rimbaud did, he cannot fail to copy the father’s hand. The word *archet* means pantograph, as well as bow; a pantograph is an instrument for the mechanical copying of a design. Instead of the dioptrical bee-hive we have a swarm of “mobile characters which, in a jumble of lower-case Didots or Garamonds, render validly present what we call the ‘letter’, namely, the essentially localised structure of the signifier” (153).

“Est-ce un?” Thus SSA puts the question of the subject, in Lacanian algebra, S¹ (S – un). That lettered bourgeoisie, H. D., had put it earlier, to Freud himself, its reversed unfinished S with a dot beneath it having appeared to her as writing on the wall, in Corfu.¹² These transfers, decalcomanias, she calls them, lead her to S for Sigmund, “Sieg-mund” as she spells it out, “the victorious voice of utterance.” Curious how H. D. reverses the usual pattern. It is she herself, not Freud, who writes her case history, she, not he, who has chosen her initials, and her object in doing so is not the preservation of her anonymity, rather the reverse. She writes:

(I have used my initials HD consistently as my writing signet or sign-manual, though it is only, at this very moment, as I check up on the word ‘signet’ in my Chambers’ English Dictionary that I realise that my writing signature has anything remotely suggesting sovereignty or the royal manner.) (66)

H. D. was clearly a queen bee. Like the heroine of her poem *Helen in Egypt*, “She herself is the writing” and Professor Freud’s consulting room at 19 Berggasse is, in both the popular and the Derridean senses, her scene.

The printed page varies, cheap news-print, good print, bad print,

smudged and uneven print – there are the great letter words of an advertisement or the almost invisible pin-print; there are the huge capitals of a child's alphabet chart or building blocks; letters or ideas may run askew on the page, as it were; they may be purposeless; they may be stereotyped and are not meant for 'reading' but as a test, as for example the symmetrical letters that don't of necessity 'spell' anything, on a doctor's or oculist's chart hung on the wall in an office or above a bed in a hospital. There are dreams or sequences of dreams that follow a line like a graph on a map or show a jagged triangular pattern, like a crack on a bowl that show the bowl or vase may at any moment fall in pieces; we all know that almost invisible thread-line on the cherished glass butter-dish that predicts it will 'come apart in me 'ands' sooner or later – sooner, more likely.

There are all these shapes, lines, graphs, *the hieroglyph of the unconscious*, and the Professor had first opened the field to the study of this vast, unexplored region. He himself – at least to me personally – deplored the tendency to *fix* ideas too firmly to set symbols, or to weld them inexorably. It is true that he himself started to decipher or decode the vast accumulation of the material of the unconscious mind; it was he who 'struck oil' but the application of the 'oil,' what could or should be made of it, could not be entirely regulated or supervised by its original 'promoter.' He struck oil; certainly there was 'something in it'; yes, a vast field for exploration and – alas – exploitation lay open. There were the immemorial Gods ranged in their semicircle on the Professor's table, that stood, as I have said, like the high altar in the Holy of Holies. There were those Gods, each the carved symbol of an idea or a deathless dream, that some people read: Goods. (92-93)

H. D.'s vision of the reversed half s-pattern of the question mark was preceded by a pattern which she identified as the base of her travelling "spirit-lamp," a tripod. She does not fail, of course, to make the connection with Delphi, so near, yet out of reach because of war-time travel restrictions. The link between the spirit and the letter, the visible and the invisible, receives this commentary from Lacan:

Of course, as it is said, the letter killeth while the spirit giveth life. We can't help but agree, having had to pay homage elsewhere to a noble victim of the error of seeking the spirit in the letter; but we should also like to know how the spirit could live without the letter. Even so, the pretensions of the spirit would remain unassailable if the letter had not shown us that it produces all the effects of truth in man without involving the spirit at all. (158-59)

Envoi

"Synthesis," wrote Proudhon, "is always on the side of government." I have therefore eschewed it in this introduction. Believing that the highest form of practice is theory (a formula singularly appropriate to the psychoanalysis of Freud) I have sought, by observing the two maxims of the psychoanalytic rule: free association (the burden of the analysand) and equally floating attention (the responsibility of the analyst), to put psychoanalytic theory into practice to the letter, in order that my preface might serve as a Rosetta Stone to the hieroglyphs that follow.

A distinction must be drawn between reading coffee grounds and reading hieroglyphics, by recalling to its own principles a technique that could not be justified were it not directed towards the unconscious.

It must be said that this is admitted only with difficulty and . . . that today's psychoanalyst can be expected to say that he decodes before he will come around to taking the necessary tour with Freud (turn at the statue of Champollion, says the guide) that will make him understand that what he does is decipher; the distinction is that a cryptogram takes on its full dimension only when it is in a lost language.

Taking the tour is simply continuing in the *Traumdeutung*.

Jacques Lacan in "The agency of the letter"

1. "Paradox," *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 1974 ed.
2. The architectural image of the facade was a favourite of Freud's. See especially *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (1953; rpt. New York: Avon Books, 1965), p. 529, where the facade of the dream is juxtaposed in his text with hysterical symptoms.
3. See William H. Gass, "The Anatomy of Mind," in *The World Within the Word* (1978; rpt. Boston: Nonpareil Books, 1979), pp. 208-52, p. 231.
4. Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer, *Studies on Hysteria*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (1955; rpt. New York: Avon Books, 1966), p. 42.
5. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 529.
6. Gass, "The Anatomy of Mind," p. 209.
7. Freud, *Five Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (1957; rpt. New York: Norton, 1977), p. 16.
8. Jacques Lacan, "The agency of the letter in the unconscious or reason since Freud," in *Ecrits*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), pp. 146-78, p. 166. Subsequent references in text.
9. Freud, *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, ed. Philip Rieff (New York: Collier, 1963), p. 55. See also *The Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 349. The alphabet, and especially its first two letters, were frequently invoked by Freud.

10. Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, ed. Howard Anderson (New York: Norton, 1980), p. 51.
11. Sterne, p. 53.
12. H. D., *Tribute to Freud* (1956; rpt. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), p. 30, "a writing-on-the-wall, a curve like a reversed, unfinished *S* and a dot beneath it, a question mark, the shadow of a question – *is this it?*" For a full description of the "writing-on-the-wall" see pp. 39-56. Subsequent page references appear in the text.