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“SOMETHING WHITE ...”

Lacanian Theory And The Theory Of Operative Devices

Ever since the beginnings of psychoanalysis, the analysis of the processes involved in artistic creation and of the imaginary structures that the work of art inscribes in representation has given rise to constant solicitations and important borrowings. Besides Sophocles and his *Oedipus*, Freud has solicited Jensen's *Gradiva*, Michelangelo's *Moses*, Leonardo's work, Shakespeare, the folklore of tales, and he has borrowed unreservedly from the common inheritance of German literature, from Goethe to Heine. The development of literary criticism as a specific scientific field does not seem to have received much benefit from a potential constitution of psychoanalysis in return. The purpose here will not be to raise the question of the legitimacy, in literary analysis, of an analytical investigation aiming at the discovery of a neurosis or a particular complex in a character or an author. In France, this type of analysis, if not totally banned, has fallen into discredit with the university institution that has now taken its stand in stark denial of psychoanalysis, which it hardly tolerates as a separate field, entirely cut off from the other social sciences and humanities.

Yet, this is also the time when a new theory has come into existence, the theory of operative devices,¹ which is *a priori* foreign to psychoanalysis as far as its themes of investigation are concerned, but which has in fact been deeply influenced by its proceedings and methods. This influence is manifested in the apprehension of the text as scene rather than as statement, in the analysis of the point of view as fascination/abjection rather than as focalisation, in the taking into account of the unsaid, the elliptical, viewed as lack and screen, i.e. as symptom and as structure, rather than as gap or fault. The space and the timelessness of the scene, the system

1. One should here distinguish a first use of the term “dispositif” by M. Foucault, G. Deleuze and J.-F. Lyotard, in the late sixties, from the theoretical construct (here translated as “operative device”) that has been developed in Toulouse since the beginning of the new century (*La Scène. Littérature et arts visuels*, M.-Th. Mathet ed., Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001). Though this second theoretical development has been carried out independently from the first, we do not think that they should be radically dissociated. See Philippe Ortel, “Vers une poétique des dispositifs,” *Discours, image, dispositif* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008) 33-58.

and the function of the gazes that cross it, the interposition of a screen that structures them, define an operative device of representation. Through a case study of a passage from Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*, I shall demonstrate what those notions owe to the Freudian and Lacanian models, but also how, conversely, once they are apprehended as a comprehensive operative device, they call these models into question and invite to new developments in the theoretical debate, at the very heart of psychoanalysis itself.

1. Narrative collapse and scenic superimposition

The shot fired by Père Roque

Flaubert's dazzling virtuosity is well-known, his skilful ingenuity in always thwarting the dramatic continuity of his narrative, as if the very essence of his technique consisted in making his reader expect terrible effects which he eventually eludes, displaces, or withholds, thus frustrating him of the pleasure he had anticipated. The account of the revolutionary events of June 1848 in *Sentimental Education* is characteristic of this deceptive strategy. Flaubert stages Père Roque's arrival in Paris. Père Roque is a nouveau riche man from Nogent whom the National Guards have posted as sentinel on the terrace of the Tuileries palace to guard the insurgents imprisoned below him. A young man asks him for bread, soon followed by all the other prisoners:

Other prisoners presented themselves at the vent-hole, with their bristling beards, their burning eyeballs, all pushing forward, and yelling:

'Bread!'

Père Roque was indignant at seeing his authority slighted. In order to frighten them he took aim at them; and, borne upward by the crush that nearly smothered him, the young man with his head thrown backward, once more shouted:

'Bread!'

'Hold on! Here it is!' said Père Roque, firing a shot with his gun. There was a huge howl — then nothing. At the side of the bucket something white had been left.²

The account of Père Roque's dramatic blunder does not trigger any development, any judgement. Père Roque goes home in the evening to the lodgings he has kept for himself in his Paris house where he joins his daughter, who is secretly in love with Frédéric in search of whom she has vainly sent their maid Catherine. Not only does the text establish no link between the father's blunder and his daughter's

2. My translation. The first official English translation is by D. F. Hannigan *Sentimental Education* (London: H. S. Nichols, 1898).

sentimental intrigue, but also each of the two narratives comes to an end without either catastrophe or sudden change. There is no wrapping up that seals off a narrative event. What keeps the representation together, what ensures the coalescence of this inchoative discursivity, is not of a textual order; it is the image, which is both perfectly clear and yet impossible to semiotize, the strangely disturbing remainder of this “something white” left on the side of the prisoners’ bucket.

Sharing soup with Louise

There is something in the order of discourse that cannot go down. Père Roque understands neither historic change nor the personal tragedy of his daughter. And yet what remains impossible to put into words returns as what this white spot is a symptom of, whether it is nothing more than a forgotten handkerchief or the horrible splashings of an exploded brain, at the moment when Père Roque, at supper, experiences indisposition:

Louise reappeared, shaking all over, unable to utter a word. She leaned against the furniture.

— ‘What’s the matter with you? Tell me’ — ‘What’s the matter with you?’ exclaimed her father.

She gestured that it was nothing, and with a great effort of will she regained her composure. The caterer from across the street brought the soup. But Père Roque had undergone too violent an emotion. ‘It couldn’t go down’, and when dessert was brought he had a sort of fainting fit.

There is no means for Louise to signify the suffering of her heart: the sign she makes says nothing. Likewise her father cannot signify the horror of the crime he has probably committed and, beyond that, the abjection of his connection to the revolutionary Thing.³ As a consequence, what signs cannot declare settles into things related to bodily functions and becomes somatic: it is contained in that soup that cannot go down. The soup is of the order of the “*id*”; it is the “something white” that, despite all the protests of his good conscience, Père Roque cannot digest. Here the text gets its organization from something that is not of a textual order, from an image that is impossible to semiotize, i.e. that cannot be integrated within a differential system of signs, and yet that, in a different fashion, through indigestion and a heaving stomach, turns into a symptom⁴ through bodily spasm, even though it does

3. “Das Ding (*la Chose*) is originally what we shall call the outside-the-signified. It is on account of this outside-the-signified and of a pathetic relation to it, that the subject keeps at a distance and constitutes himself in a mode of relation, of primary affect, anterior to all repression.” Jacques Lacan, *Séminaire VII, L’Éthique de la psychanalyse 1959-1960* (Paris: Seuil, 1986) 67-68) (My translation)

4. See *Séminaire XXIII*, referred to as *Le Sinthome*, about James Joyce (Paris: Seuil, 2005) where Lacan states that “language is connected to something that functions like a hole [...]. It is from this function of the hole that language gets its hold upon the real.” (31) This hold is defined as a Borromean knot, which implies three pieces of string, only one of

not make sense. A sublime fit of weakness of the daughter and an abject indigestion of the father are both displayed within the framework of the insurrection of June, a double convulsion of the body within the convulsion of History.

Elided scenes

In Flaubert's writing, critics usually insist upon the introspective work of the word-ing rather than on its relationship to the world.⁵ Yet this embodiment of the sense as a detail that it is impossible to identify is not essentially meant to signify an inner depth inaccessible to speech. There is nothing of an intimate kind, nothing psychological in this something white that is left there "on the side of the bucket"; the use of the definite article (*the*, not *a* bucket), though this is the only place where this bucket appears in the text, implies that it is meant to define a scene that the narration has subsequently elided. This same monstrative effect reappears in the evening scene, when "*the* caterer from across the street brought *the* soup." The definite articles refer to an environment that is familiar, with its habits and rules, yet this caterer and this soup appear only this time and never again in the novel. Flaubert is pointing to a familiar scene, but cuts it out precisely because it is familiar.

Thus the novelist has arranged the spaces, the objects, the circumstances of one and even two scenes: the shooting in front of the terrace at the water's edge in the Tuileries and the supper of Père Roque with his daughter, two scenes that are erased, so to speak, since nothing remains of the shooting, "a huge howl, then nothing" and the supper in fact does not take place, "it could not go down" and it is concluded by a fainting fit. The medicine prescribed by the doctor is substituted for the soup, just as the gun shot had been substituted for the bread.

Narrative lure, spatial arrangement, operative device

It is of course the sequencing of these two barred out scenes that makes sense, their chronological succession, and most of all their logical superimposition. The sense is born from the superimposition of the soup on the bread and of the absent

which keeps the other two tied together: "the Borromean knot does not constitute a model however, though there is something about it that causes the imagination to collapse. What I mean is that as such it resists the imagination of the knot." (42) The "something white" is exactly the kind of thing that Lacan defines as a symptom: it appears in the hole of the vent and knots Père Roque's world with that underworld. But it ties it up in a fashion that cannot be imagined, and cannot even be put into words.

5. "The large number of descriptions in his work is not related essentially, as with Balzac for instance, to necessities of a dramatic order, but mostly to what he does himself call *the love of contemplation*. One can of course find a few descriptive tableaux [...] whose presence is justified by the need to give the action and the feelings some kind of clarifying framework [...] But most of the time the description unfolds on its own account, at the expense of the action which it serves less, or so it seems, to clarify than to suspend and to push into the background." Gérard Genette, "Flaubert's silences", *Figures I* (Paris: Seuil, 1966) 234. (My translation)

Frédéric on the young man that was shot, from the incapacity of Père Roque to see, to confront, with his own eyes, the first as well as the second tragedy. Thus it is not by means of narration that Flaubert manufactures his meaning. The arrangement of the theatrical and scenic props ought to lead to a dramatic narrative, to a discursive sequence. Instead of that, the unfolding of time is used as an alibi for a mere juxtaposition: “After that, Mr. Roque returned home”; “Then, when he was in his bed, Mr. Roque demanded as many blankets as were available.” The unfolding of time is here a mere lure: there is neither duration, nor any event in that succession; Flaubert passes from one sequence, one arrangement, to the next. Time is the alibi of the editing process. Time is the instrument of scenaristic juxtaposition.

What I am primarily trying to show is that, within the technique of novel writing, narration is always a lure. This is not what writing is made for and it is not with such an instrument that the novelist creates. What is being used in a novel is spatial arrangements;⁶ these arrangements are themselves offered to the imagination of the reader to be superimposed upon each other and to make sense from this superimposition. The arrangement of the various spaces, their imaginary superimposition, and finally the construction of sense from this superimposition, constitute what is referred to as an *operative device*.

The analytical device: a precursory model

Indeed we can approach literature in that manner only because we are the heirs of psychoanalysis. Not that it has invented the operative devices any more than the Oedipus complex has come into existence with Freud... But it was psychoanalysis that first called attention to these devices, explored the way they operate, put their mode of operation to use in the cure and, by this means, placed them at the heart of a theory of representation and significance.

What is an operative device for psychoanalysis? To start with one should distinguish two levels. On the one hand the external device of the cure (the analyst's

6. Genette rejects this dimension of literature: “One can, even should, also consider literature in its relationships to space. Not only — and that would be the easiest and least pertinent way of considering these relationships — because literature, among other ‘topics’, also speaks of space, describes places, dwellings, landscapes [...] transports us in imagination to unknown countries, which for a time it gives us the illusion that we are travelling through or inhabiting [...]. Those are aspects of spatiality that may occupy or inhabit literature, but which may not be part of its essence, of its language.” Gérard Genette “Literature and space,” *Figures II* (Paris: Seuil, 1969) 43-44. Genette defines the space of literature as “spatiality of language”, which he identifies as the space of the text, and then as the rhetorical interplay of figures, and finally as the meta-space of the library. In contradistinction to this, thanks to the notion of scene, the theory of operative devices places back the spatial arrangement at the heart of artistic creation as a whole, and of literary creation in particular.

consulting room,⁷ the relative position of analyst and analysed person in that room, the mechanism of transference that this relative position is meant to frame, to regulate). On the other hand the internal device, that consists of the phantasmatic material that the cure unearths and to which it is brought to assign a meaning. There are therefore two scenes or, more precisely, two levels in the launching of a scene, first in the real, in the patient's past as he has lived it⁸ and then in the cure, i.e. in what takes place in the consulting room. The patient's speech does, in some way or other, articulate those two levels by inserting a verbal representation of the past scenes into the analytic scene: between the traumatic release of the real, in the past, and the symbolic elaboration of the cure, in the consulting room, the analyzed person's discourse weaves an imaginary interface and it is all that put together that constitutes the analytic device.⁹

Flaubert's operative device

The episode of Père Roque, in *The Sentimental Education*, does not function differently: a first level releasing a scene, in the Tuileries, "in front of the riverside terrace" in the real and in history, is superimposed, thanks to Flaubert's narrative,

7. This relative position was experimented for the first time by Freud, or rather it imposed itself to him, so to speak, in the course of a treatment by hypnosis of "Frau Emmy von N..., age 40. from Livonia. [...] May 1, in 1889. — This lady, when I first saw her, was lying on a sofa with her head resting on a leather cushion. She still looked young and had finely-cut features, full of character. [...] every two or three minutes she suddenly broke off, contorted her face into an expression of horror and disgust, stretched out her hand towards me, spreading and crooking her fingers, and exclaimed, in a changed voice, charged with anxiety: 'Keep still! — Don't say anything! — Don't touch me!' She was probably under the influence of some recurrent hallucination of a horrifying kind and was keeping the intruding material at bay with this formula." (Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer *Studies on Hysteria. The Standard Edition. Vol. 2*, ed. James Strachey (London; Hogarth press, 1955-1964) 48-49.

8. It is the primal scene, as theorized by Freud in "The Wolf Man" (1918). Freud insists on the part of lived reality that there is in that scene, even if later it has given rise to a phantasmatic elaboration which makes its relationship to the event that has caused it unrecognizable. See "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis", *The Standard Edition, Vol. 17*, 33ff.

9. This function of the patient's speech appears as early as in the case of Fraülein Anna O.: "She aptly described this procedure, speaking seriously, as a 'talking cure', while she referred to it jokingly as 'chimney sweeping'." (*Studies on Hysteria*, 30) Freud speaks of "assuaging by telling" (*Ibid*). In "The function and respective fields of speech and language in psychoanalysis" (*Ecrits* (Paris, Seuil, 1966), 254), Lacan shows that, in that work of putting into words, what is at stake is not the restoration of a sequence of time (such as that implied in the Bergsonian model of remembrance) but the construction of a truth. The analysand's discourse, captured in the "vacillation of its content between the imaginary and the real" (p. 255), should not therefore be taken as a narration, but as the "material" for the analysis. The revindication of the narrative lure, the jobbing together of the discursive material, the superimposition of the primal scene, the obsessive scene (see note 16) and the analytic scene characterize the experience of the cure as operative device.

upon a second level of scenic release, in the intimate space of Père Roque's pied-à-terre in the rue Saint-Martin. It is in that intimate space, and only there, that well after the event, what is left of the traumatic horror of the real can be discharged, after being first reinvested in the symptom ("it couldn't go down") and then in its verbal representation, a wording susceptible of weaving the structural articulation of the two levels:

Mr. Roque demanded as many blankets as were available, to induce a sweat. He kept sighing and moaning.

— 'Thank you my good Catherine!' — 'Kiss your poor father, my little hussey! ah! those revolutions!'

And, as his daughter scolded him for making himself sick by worrying on her account, he replied:

— 'Yes! You are right! But I can't help it! I am too sensitive!'

This dialogue of father and daughter does not merely represent the misunderstanding of two tragedies that cannot communicate. Without any didactic explanation of this misunderstanding, it provides all the necessary elements for its uncoding. Père Roque and his daughter seem to share the same anguish but whereas Mr. Roque is sick from discharging his shot, Louise is suffering from Frédéric's absence. Yet neither of them is ready to let the other know the real cause of his or her suffering. When Mr. Roque transmutes his guilt into indigestion, Louise interprets her father's selfish anguish as concern for her in an apparently more generous spirit which is in fact totally self-centred and therefore exactly symmetrical with her father's.

The dialogue objectifies for the reader a misunderstanding that it does not dramatize, that it does not invest into discourse. It is left to the reader, as he uncodes the misunderstanding, to tie the knot that links the two scenes. Thus it is the dialogue that closes this chapter that, despite its appearance of saying nothing, of eluding the essential, delivers the structure of the narrative that clinches two rigorously opposed wounds to the intimate self.

The signifier's play and the verbal screen

Flaubert's narrative brings to light the analyzed person's discursive strategies in their fully perverse subtlety, an apparent insignificant discourse at first, a defensive discourse which lures or deceives but, in its very denial, objectifies, through the signifier's play, what the discursive intent refuses to formulate. The exclamation "Oh! *those* revolutions!" displaces, sinks the "something white" which "had remained" into the sententious power of the deictic "*those*". Thus language transforms the traumatic event into something collective, it turns the unshareable white thing into a shared suffering, that is not even that of those unnameable days of June, but that of a general truth, universally experienced in all revolutions.

This displacement, this partial covering up of the original signifier by discourse then creates a signifying link, establishes a “step-beyond-sense”¹⁰ whose function it is to interpret Père Roque’s suffering in the light of Louise’s. The father transfers the abjection that belongs to him upon his daughter, turns over the hatred and the cowardice of the shot he has fired into an act of love, which is perhaps even more revolting: “But I cannot help it! I am too sensitive!”

The paternal metaphor

This reversal gives us something else to read: if the analytical device, as Lacan suggests, must always be referred back to Plato’s *Symposium* and the couch to Alcibiades’ bed for love-making,¹¹ Père Roque’s bed does indeed unveil a terrifying primal scene when, like the simpleton he is, he orders his “little hussey” to “kiss” him. Behind the vent-hole in the Tuileries, the father has killed all the eventual pretenders to his daughter’s love, thus preserving for himself the devouring exclusivity of paternal enjoyment. Symptomatically, the shot he has fired has not produced the red spot of a wound, of a consummation, but “something white” that is a mark of virginity, which removes Louise from the circuit of desire, which excludes her beforehand and irremissibly from the others’ gaze.

In the next chapter, when the Roques find themselves again with Frédéric for an evening party at the Dambreuses’ house, Mme Arnoux is wearing “something red in her hair, a sprig of lilac entangled in its coils,” mirroring Frédéric’s first dinner

10. Lacan elaborated this notion of “pas de sens” (which I render here as “step-beyond-sense” in an attempt to render the pun on “pas” which signifies both “step” and “no”) when he gave his reading of Freud’s *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*. “For an instance of wit to exist, the Other must have perceived what it contains of [...] a demand for sense, i.e. of an evocation of a sense beyond — beyond what has been left unfinished [...]. I do not think that the term nonsense should be kept [...]. I propose to use the formula: step-beyond-sense [...]. This step-beyond-sense is properly speaking what is realized in metaphor. It is the intention of the subject, his need that, beyond the metonymic usage, beyond what finds its satisfaction in common use, in the well-worn received values, introduces the step-beyond-sense into metaphor [...]. What is wit doing there? It does not indicate anything more than the very extent of the step as such, properly speaking [...]. It is the step emptied of any kind of need.” Jacques Lacan *Séminaire V, 1957, Les Formations de l’inconscient* (Paris: Seuil, 1988) 98-99. In Flaubert’s episode, Louise’s desire is authenticated by her father, her father’s abjection is authenticated by Louise, but in the empty form of “it couldn’t go down” and of the Flaubertian irony of “I am too sensitive”. These vague and false formulations are emptied out of the need which motivates them so that this need is so to speak authenticated on the side. It is this sleight of hand that Lacan refers to as “step-beyond-sense”: beyond the nonsense, the ridiculous absurdity of the words that are exchanged, the step-beyond-sense brings out their metaphorical bearing. They have only been displaced and hollowed out.

11. “The final articulation of the *Symposium*, this fable, this scenario which confines to myth, allows us to structure the situation of the analyzed person in the presence of the analyst around the position of two desires.” Jacques Lacan *Séminaire VIII, Le Transfert*, 1960 (Paris: Seuil, 1991) 212.

with the Arnoux. Mme Arnoux had then been wearing “in her hair, a long Algerian purse in red silk network which, entangled in her comb, was hanging over her left shoulder.” To the red thing of desire is opposed the white thing of prohibition; to the network or net of seduction, the unnameable and formless “it” of “it couldn’t go down”.

2. Scenic fiction and its modelization through the act of looking

Here one is confronted with the fundamental paradox of the juxtaposition of those two Flaubertian scenes: both come to nothing because of the indefinite nature of what pretends to structure them, “something white” and “it couldn’t go down.” At the same time it is this very indefiniteness that clinches them together and crystallizes the “step-beyond-sense” of their superimposition. Flaubert makes discourse come to nothing and shatters the narrative sequences (“a huge howl, then nothing”; “she gestured that it was nothing”) in order to make manifest the powerful fictional coherence of his narrative at another level, which could be called visionary. There is a stability of what the text gives us to imagine, an obviousness of the identity of the something white, of the soup and of the potion, and also an obviousness of their equivalence with what is thus pointed out, beyond the brutality of the counter-revolutionary repression, as a lack opposed to Louise’s desire, as a lack opposed to Père Roque’s desire.

The Cartesian interpretation of the act of looking as a geometrical triangle

This is modelized in Lacan’s *Séminaire XI, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. After bringing to light the paradigmatic character of the anamorphosis in Holbein’s *The Ambassadors* in order to explain how the act of looking is an outward movement that is reversed under the action of the scopic impulse, Lacan draws upon the blackboard “this little triangular diagram” which dissociates the two fundamental levels of the act of looking on the one hand and of seeing on the other:

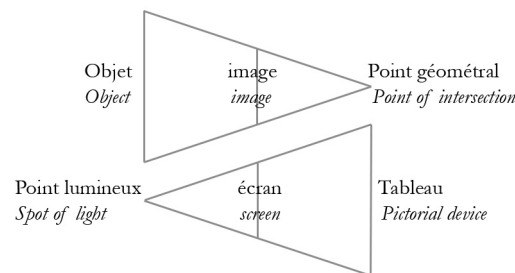


Figure 1: The little triangular diagram (Jacques Lacan, *Séminaire XI, 1964, Du regard comme objet petit a* (Paris, Seuil, 1973) 85)

The first triangle defines looking in terms of the Cartesian optics which are based on geometry.¹² The object is apprehended by the eye in the abstract, mathematically, as a series of points connected by lines. Between the real object and the mathematical system of points that will represent it, the image is what the eyes reconstruct as object for the subject. Thus the image reduces the absolute otherness of the object that is settled in the real to an interiorized representation, made subjective by the eyes.

In Flaubert's scene, Père Roque, standing in front of the "riverside terrace" in the Tuileries, is looking through the vent-hole at the prisoners of the June insurrection:

There, at any rate, he had them under his feet, these brigands! He enjoyed their defeat, their abjection, and couldn't refrain from uttering invectives against them.

One of them, a lad with long fair hair, put his face to the bars, asking for bread.

The observed object is caught by the observing eye through the bars of the vent-hole, which divide the image into geometric squares in the manner of Alberti's intersector, or of the machine to calculate the right perspective imagined by Dürer. This cross-ruling by the bars of what becomes the portrait of a "young lad with long fair hair" ensures the mastery of the looking subject over the object he is looking at: "There, at any rate, he had them under his feet, these brigands!" The image that is framed by the vent-hole, reducing the object to a set of points, degrades the brutal and anguishing otherness into a solipsist enjoyment, the joy of mastering a tamed, domesticated object, this yoyo of the *fort-da* that Lacan names the *small a object*. Père Roque is looking at the prisoners, but in his looking at them, he misinterprets them entirely.

The scopic interlacing

The enjoyment of the looking eye is however extremely short-lived, as it is placed at the hinge of a reversal of situation that will crystallize the novelistic scene. "As for us, Lacan says, the dimension of geometry makes it possible for us to catch a glimpse of how the subject we are concerned with is caught, manoeuvred, imprisoned in the field of vision." (*Séminaire XI* 86) The geometry-based field of looking is

12. "You should also note that if each of the two hands, f and g, hold a stick i and h, with which they touch the object k: though the soul has no knowledge of the length of these sticks, yet, as it will know the distance there is between the two points f and g, and the extent of [the angles] fgh, and gfi, it will be able to know, as by a kind of natural geometry, where the object k is situated. Likewise, if the two eyes L and M are turned towards the object N, the length of the line LM and that of the two angles LMN, MLN, will allow it to know where the point N is situated." (René Descartes *L'Homme* (Paris: Garnier, (1664) 1988), 428-9. My translation. See also p. 459 and *La Dioptrique*, 1637, "De la vision", *ibid.* 704) The image of the man with two sticks, which illustrates both *The Dioptrics* and the treatise *On Man*, will be taken up again by Diderot in his *Letter on the Blind* (1749).

then reversed into the scopic field of vision, which defines the second triangle. In Flaubert's scene, this change is characterized by a reversal of the relations between the characters. Père Roque does not master anything any more. He no longer is the spectator looking at defeated revolutionaries from above; he is now himself a prey to the fiery eyes of the prisoners:

Other prisoners appeared in the vent-hole, with bristling beards and fiery eyes, all pushing forward and yelling:

— 'Bread!'

We have passed from an economy of looking (and drawing the portrait of the young lad behind the bars) to an economy of the eye (where Père Roque finds himself under the fiery shafts of the prisoners' eyes). The geometry of the image has been replaced by the interlacing of the screen, in which Père Roque is, in some way, made a prisoner. In that interlacing, there is no question of perspective, of depth, of lines. It is all either light or opacity: on one side, the fiery glow of the eyes in the semi-darkness of the Tuileries' vent-hole; on the other, Père Roque standing against the light, a black sentinel screening the light from the insurrectionists, like a sign of the death that is awaiting them. Between the horror of the vent-hole and the external world, Père Roque plays the part of the screen, a function that requires the object that is being looked at turning opaque. At the same time as the prisoners' point of view is reduced to a scream for bread, the image, the young lad's portrait, becomes indistinct and disappears:

Père Roque was indignant at seeing his authority slighted. In order to frighten them, he took aim at them; and, borne upward to the roof of the vault by the crush that nearly smothered him, the young man, with his head thrown backward, once more yelled:

— 'Bread!'

One has passed from looking to seeing; a seeing that is directly linked to the collapse of the symbolic structures. What Père Roque sees is "his slighted authority" or, in other words, the disappearance of the mastery and the position of superiority that had at first organized the space of the scene and made it meaningful. ("There, at any rate, he had them under his feet, these brigands!") Seeing obscures the capacity to look and Flaubert shows us how the young man's portrait dissolves at the very moment when Père Roque himself is reduced merely to an eye governed by the scopic impulse, an eye that takes aim at the prisoners. As he takes his aim, he ceases to look at them as distinct objects: they are no more than vague forms mixed with howling voices, a "crush"¹³ bearing them upward to the roof of the vault and smothering the portrait, whose head, thrown backward, loses its shape and disappears.

13. Flaubert's word "flot" almost suggests a tidal-wave.

The pictorial device

In the economy of seeing, the screen is the first solicitation that manifests itself, no longer as a verbal but as a scopic screen. It is the screen that brings into play the pictorial device, which Lacan defines as follows:

The pictorial device — in connection with whomever the painter literally gives his painting to see — is related to the act of looking [...]. To the person that must be standing in front of his painting, the painter gives something that, for a great number of paintings at least, could be summed up as — *You want to look? Well then see this!* He gives something for the eye to feed on, but he invites the person to whom the painting is thus presented to lay his eyes upon it, as one lays down one's weapons." (*Séminaire XI*, 93)

The device deconstructs the act of looking by exhibiting a "something" which is pure visuality, luminous but without lines, irreducible to geometry. This "something" that Lacan elsewhere refers to as a spot, is the "something white" of the scene, which constitutes, at the back of the screen, the spot of light from which the picture will be structured at the front. The act of looking is then restored in the pacified, distanced form of aesthetic contemplation.

The painter's activity described here is but an instance of what is at work in any situation of representation, in social life as well as in the artistic field, which brings into play a scopic impulse, and from which a pictorial device comes to light for the subject. But what is striking is that the very terms that Lacan uses to characterize this pictorial device are exactly those used by Flaubert in his scene. First there is the challenge from the painting to the eye: "You want to look? Well then, see this!" The pictorial device does indeed answer a demand, but it answers it in its own terms, which are both displaced and in excess of the demand, giving something "for the eye to feed on." In Flaubert's scene, the demand is for bread: you want bread? Well then "here it is! said Père Roque, firing his shot." The point here is indeed exclusively to feed the demand, and to feed it in a decisive manner so-to-speak: with death, which always lurks below the scopic impulse and which is the only means to resolve it.¹⁴

14. We have suggested earlier that the parallelism of the two scenes of Père Roque confronting the insurgents of June 1848, and then facing Louise mourning her loss of Frédéric, created an imaginary identity between the prisoners in the Tuileries and the pretenders to Louise's love, so that the "step-beyond-sense" which articulates the whole operative device does indeed constitute a paternal metaphor. It is the Father that one asks for bread, for a morbid totemic feast in which it is the pretenders, not the Father, that are reduced to "something white". The scene contains this epic, Hugolian so-to-speak, potentiality that Flaubert hollows out, reducing it to the purity of a line. Yet the two moments of this episode do indeed bear, though in an attenuated, almost unrecognizable form, the prohibition to consummate first the Father's bread and then his daughter's body, in other words "the two principal ordinances of totemism", which "coincide in their content with the two crimes of Oedipus" (Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo. The Standard Edition Vol. 13*, 132) This

The scenic reversal: Petit-Jean's revolted eye

One lays down eyes as one lays down arms, says Lacan. If, by firing his gun, Père Roque in a way makes the insurgents lay down their weapons, silences their demand for bread, we can right away note that this revolting, horror-filled pacification of the eye is by no means Apollinian. Manoeuvred by Flaubert, the reader's eye, that at this point relays Père Roque's blinded eye, frames a scene which is the very reverse of what he chooses not to see.

Here we are close to what Lacan tells of Petit-Jean's story, and of the sardine tin which, as it floated by, did not see Lacan on his boat:

first, if there is any sense in Petit-Jean's statement that the sardine tin does not see me, it is because, in some sort of sense, the tin is nevertheless staring at me. It is staring at me at the level of the spot of light, where all that stares at me is situated, and this is no metaphor. (*Séminaire XI*, 89)

The "something white" which reduces the object that is looked at to a mere spot of light, which deconstructs reality into the primary dazzling force of the real for Père Roque's eye, is nevertheless staring at him, implicating him despite himself. It is staring at him, but not merely in a metaphorical fashion, it is staring him in the eye, in the sense of a political, or a penal responsibility. From this spot of light, Père Roque triggers off the pictorial and then the whole scenic device in which he will be involved in his house, rue Saint-Martin. A pure, radically non-theatrical, act of brutality, the shot fired by Père Roque nevertheless conditions the whole representation of the supper, of the fit of sickness and of the verbal exchange with his daughter.

A schematic diagram of the scenic device

The model for this representation is the superimposition of the "two triangular systems" formerly introduced, a superimposition that does not define the Lacanian pictorial device (as one might erroneously be induced to think by the title of chapter IX, "Qu'est-ce qu'un tableau?"¹⁵), but very precisely the Freudian scene, that

is of course a typical example of tracing and analyzing unlooked for points of similarity that deeply hurts the academic habits of thought. The academic establishment finds the idea of a Flaubertian totemism absolutely revolting; the text does not say that, Flaubert has never wanted that. The obscenity does not only concern the matter (the obscene meaning of the text); it is an obscenity of principle (a methodological aberration). It comes from the fact that what is being tracked down here does not concern a mode of discourse or an intention, not even an unconscious one. Whether anything is indicated of the Flaubertian unconscious is of no great import. The operative device is more detached from the author, more immersed into the submerged configurations of culture and representation. This fundamental, so-to-speak totemic feature, is what, in the classical economy of representation, articulates the two triangles of "the little triangular diagram."

15. Here we understand "Qu'est-ce qu'un tableau ?" as "Qu'est-ce que faire tableau ?", so that the title should be translated as "What is a pictorial device ?".

is the superimposition of the shock, the psychic trauma (which can be identified as corresponding to the first triangle, the triangle of geometry) and the neurotic repetition of the symptoms (which is so-to-speak manifested in the second triangle or scopic triangle).¹⁶

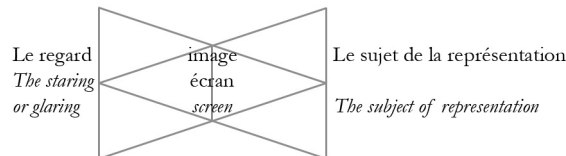


Figure 2: The scenic operative device is made of the superimposition of the prospective triangle (turned to the left) and of the scopic triangle (turned to the right).

The staring refers to the person that is looking at the picture, here Père Roque confronting the prisoners on the other side of the vent-hole. But what Lacan means by “staring” (which, in this particular case could even be considered as “glaring”) does not refer so much to the act of looking (as we usually think of it), as to its position as *little a object*, in other words the fact that what is confronting the looking person’s eye is something that is staring back at him, something that concerns him, something that is pointing at him. It reaches something deep in him, something that is not an otherness, but the very reverse, something that is part of the intimate self. The Lacanian look (or stare, or glare etc.) is this intimate self that is reached in the looking subject at the moment of his looking.

Confronting “the looking eye,” “the subject that is represented” is what, in the spectator’s eye, triggers off a pictorial device, i.e. collapses as subject in order to remain in the spectator’s eye only as a spot of light. This collapse however gives rise to something in excess, a “something white” opening the onlooker’s eye to a device that exceeds the exclusively intimate impact of the scene. It is the real, it is the Revolution, this wordless brutality, that submerges and dismays Père Roque.

The vent-hole articulates the scenic operative device between the looking eye as *little a object* (Père Roque) and the collapsed subject of representation (the group of prisoners). Through the mere distribution of light and shade,¹⁷ one can understand

16. For the dissociation of a primal scene and an obsessive scene, see *Séminaire XI, V, Tuchè & Automaton*. We are coming here to a fundamental dimension of the device, which is the superimposition of different layers of representation: the processes of condensation and displacement, that Freud has brought to light in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, can be detected only after those superimpositions have been put into evidence in the discourse of the dreamer, then of the patient.

17. In *La Princesse de Clèves*, the scene of the cane from India relies on a similar operative device, with a reversed distribution of light and shade. The Duke de Nemours is standing in the darkness of the park and gazing at Madame de Clèves musing in her closet. Nemours is nothing but pure gaze. All that Madame de Clèves, herself the subject of representation, sees from her lighted place, is a shade emerging from the night. The window

how Père Roque elaborates what is less a point of view on the scene than a picture, framed by the vent-hole and lighted from outside, whereas the prisoners are confronted with Père Roque's silhouette standing against the light, like a screen that obscures their vision. The vent-hole serves as both frame for the image and place for the screen; it represents and obscures at the same time.¹⁸

The theatrical and the photographic models

Lacan describes the way the looking subject (here Père Roque), caught by the reversed gaze of the visible that is looking at him (the prisoners), himself triggers off a pictorial device:

Here lies the function that is at the most intimate of the institution of the subject in the visible. What fundamentally determines my presence in the visible is the gaze that comes from outside. It is through that gaze that I come into light, and it is from that gaze that I receive its benefit. Which means that the gaze is the instrument through which light is incarnated, and through which — if I am allowed to use a word in a way that I often favour, i.e. by splitting it into its component parts — I am *photo-graphed*.” (*Séminaire XI*, 98)

In this instance, in Flaubert's text, if, symbolically, the insurgents' glare comes from outside, this symbolic outside is an inside from the point of view of geometry, i. e. not a stage but a cellar, a place of darkness. We are here in the presence of an historical specificity of the Flaubertian operative device: its imaginary model for representation is not the window of perspective that opens onto an outside, a landscape. It is the dark room, which the real enters in order to be printed. As a result,

frames a picture for Nemours who is standing outside, but is a screen for Mme de Clèves who is sitting inside. This function of the screen is later materialized in the narrative by Nemours' scarf which gets caught in the knob of the French window when he attempts to enter the lodge. Mme de La Fayette, *Les oeuvres de Mme La Fayette* (Paris: Garnier, 1964), 367; my translation. The operative device is the same again in the scene at Montjouvain, in *Du Côté de Chez Swann*: the narrator is posted behind an embankment and spying, from outside through a window, upon Mlle de Vinteuil and her girlfriend, going through the preliminaries of a sadic scene that goes to the quick of his intimate self: “The memory of that impression was to play an important part in my life.” The scene itself however escapes the narrator's gaze for “Mlle de Vinteuil, with weary, clumsy, busy, honest and sad eyes came over and closed the shades and the window”. Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu* (Paris: Gallimard, Pléiade, 1987) 157 and 161 ; my translation.

18. Modeling the text as an operative device brings into light the autonomy of fiction with respect to representation. Flaubert's text does not scrutinize Père Roque's point of view and that of the prisoners successively. But he relies upon a spatial arrangement that, in a way, preexists the narration and is used as a prop for the reader's imagination. The antecedence of this fictional world gives the reader the illusion that the narration has an autonomous non textual life susceptible of any imaginary extension. The power to suggest this autonomy of the fictional world manifests itself in the sometimes passionate speculations of our students about what the characters may have done or thought “when the text was not there to give us a record of it”...

the gaze does not make the subject come into light, it makes him detach himself in the negative as a shade, which the Lacanian formula eventually catches up by referring to the subject trapped in the net of optical representation as a *photo-graphed* subject. These are in fact two distinct models: the theatrical model, which delimits a scene of representation on the lighted stage, and the photographic model, which, conversely, establishes in the dark a space of invisibility where the real is secretly printed: to the institution of the subject in the visible is opposed the constitution of the unconscious reserve.

3. The structural articulation of the narrative operative device

As the first scene of Père Roque in the Tuileries collapses upon itself and leads to the pointing of an invisibility (“a huge howl, then nothing. On the edge of the bucket something white had remained.”), the theatrical performance itself is delayed and eventually transferred to the evening meal. Only then does Père Roque step into the light of social interplay, and literally incarnates this play by bodily experiencing the revolution in his fit of sickness.

The screen as theatrical mask

Louise and her father are play-acting to each other; they are wearing the mask of the bourgeois social conventions: Louise acts the part of the accomplished daughter, whereas Père Roque sets himself up as the imaginary invalid.

It was his daughter herself who opened the door for him. She immediately told him that his prolonged absence had made her uneasy; she had feared he had met with a misfortune, a wound.

This mark of filial love softened Père Roque’s heart. He was surprised that she should have set out without Catherine.

— ‘I sent her on an errand’, Louise answered.

And she enquired about his health, about one thing and another; then, with an air of indifference, enquired whether by any chance he had come across Frédéric.

A bourgeois home, conventional politeness, all to hide a quasi-murder and something close to a lover in the closet: here Flaubert is flirting with the vaudeville, introducing poor theatrical play within the novelistic scene. Father and daughter are parading in this variety ritual, and putting into full play the luring effect of the scopic field they are involved in.

However the subject — the human subject, the subject of desire which is the very essence of man — contrarily to the animal, is not entirely caught in this imaginary net. He finds his bearings. By what means? In so far as *he* isolates the function of the screen and uses it. Indeed man can play with the

mask as that beyond which looking takes place. The place of mediation here is the screen. (*Séminaire XI*, 99)

Contrary to the peacock's spreading out its tail or to the nuptial parades of the insects, in human representation the luring effect is only partial. Neither the person that gives a picture of himself as subject of representation, nor the other person that, through his gaze, sends back his image to him, is a complete dupe of the theatrical game in which they are implicated.

Reality is on the margin

The real spills over the margin; on the periphery of masks, the subject as well as the object of the scopic exchange manifest, point out, a reality that escapes the lure, an external dimension of desire that is irreducible to the tricks of stage-play. Lacan figures this peripheral dimension of reality in the pictorial device as follows:

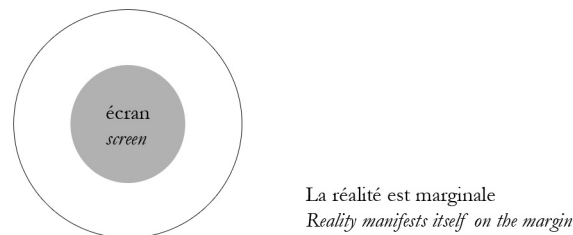


Figure 3: The screen and the reality in the scenic operative device (Lacan, *Séminaire XI*, 91)

Reality does indeed manifest itself on the margin of the text, as an absence kept out of the scenic space where the dialogue is taking place: Louise tells her father “that his prolonged absence had made her uneasy.” This absence sends us back to the revolutionary reality and to the gunshot, which is screened off by the conviviality of the verbal exchange. Père Roque’s answer also points out an absence: why has Louise set out to the small flat of the rue Saint-Martin “without Catherine?” The absence of Catherine is a symptom of the search for Frédéric, the real object of Louise’s uneasiness, over which her concern for her father is a mere façade. Louise’s last question to Père Roque is about Frédéric’s absence, which is indeed the one absence that is covered up by all the others: but she asks her question “with an air of indifference” and introduces it with “if by any chance.” Moreover, her question is not formulated in terms of absence, but in those of a possible meeting, in other words not as the expression of a lack, upon which any chain of meaning, any linguistic message, is built, but as an illusive satisfaction of desire, as a parade and a lure which is no less than an embodiment of her own desire to meet Frédéric.¹⁹

19. Strictly speaking, one should distinguish two successive Lacanian topics here. The first ones are centered on a lack and unfold according to a linguistic model. At the basis of the constitution of the subject, Lacan places this demand which is articulated upon a para-

Flaubert's narrative device: façade as structural articulation

Between his gunshot in the Tuileries and his entrance in his rooms in the rue Saint-Martin, Mr. Roque stops in front of the façade of his house which has been damaged by the mob in the riots:

After that Mr. Roque returned home; for he owned a house on the rue Saint-Martin in which he had kept rooms for himself; and the damage caused by the riots to the front of his house had in no slight degree contributed to excite his rage. It seemed to him, on seeing it again, that he had exaggerated the injury. The act he had just committed had a soothing effect, like an indemnity.

Flaubert establishes an explicit link between “the front of the house” and “the act just committed,” i.e. the shooting of a gun. This explicit linkage invites us to see an implicit link with the dialogue that follows, in which Louise says that she has feared “some misfortune, a wound” for her father. The front of the house is therefore a means to introduce the façade play of the dialogue between the lover and the murderer. On this house front, the trace of “the damage caused by the riots” both makes an image with reference to the frame, to the marginal reality of the revolution, and is at the same time a screen, hiding the horror of the crime, or at least providing an alibi for it, since it is “like an indemnity” for it.

There is no circulation of signifiers²⁰ without a concomitant setting the scopic impulse²¹ into action, no verbal dialectics of the demand and of the message without triggering off a pictorial device. To the verbal screen of the “something”, of the “id”, both for the Revolution and for Frédéric, correspond the scopic screen of the vent-hole, and that of the front of the house. To the game of masks of the dialogue between Louise and her father, based on “the dialectics of desire and demand”²² corresponds the visual game of gazes in which are interchanged the roles of subject of the gaze (of spectator encircled by the “id” which is looking at him) and of subject of the representation (of the pictorial device that is triggered off for the spectator by a symptom, something white, traces of bullets on the house front).

doxical signifier, “the signifier of the point where the signifier is lacking”, which he calls “capital Φ ”. As signifier of the phallus, borne upon the castration complex, Φ is the “warrant” of “the whole chain of signifiers” but “always keeps hidden, always keeps veiled” (Jacques Lacan, *Séminaire VIII, Le Transfert*, 272 and XVII, 286-287) The second topics of the subject, which are iconic, appear in *Séminaire XI* and are centered on the image/screen reversal. The screen replaces Φ and it is no longer the chain of signifiers, but all representations that are established from the shadow, from the spot, the lack, which it sets visually in the center. The parade and the lure assume a place in these second topics, in addition to the sole unfolding of the chain of signifiers.

20. This refers to the first Lacanian topics, which Lacan represents by “the graph of desire”. See *Séminaire V: Les Formations de l'inconscient*, 1957 (Paris, Seuil, 1998), 511.

21. This setting into action is modeled on “the small triangular diagram”. See illustration 1

22. This is the title of the third part of *Séminaire V*. See p.353.

The articulation of those structures takes place at the meta-level of the operative device. Lacan does not use the term of “dispositif” and it is striking that the word “scene,” that was recurrent in Freud, disappears from Lacan’s vocabulary at the very moment when, in *Séminaire XI*, he theorizes the scopic impulse.

Splitting up the symbolic

Indeed Lacanian discourse prepares the way for the new theories of scene and operative device. Caught in the linguistic schematism, against which he is at the same time constantly rebelling,²³ Lacan keeps exploiting word-play and contorted discourse supposedly capable of making language work against the formal structuralism of instituted discourse. The torus, the knot, the padding stitch, Moebius’s ribbon are as many attempts to get out of this linguistic circle with which the theory of the operative device means to break more radically, by splitting up the Lacanian category of the symbolic. For in the same way as the imaginary runs through both the fictional constitution of the geometrically organized space of the scene and the scopic circulation of the gaze and the eye, of looking and seeing, likewise it is the symbolic that structures both the discourse of masks, in the lure of the scenic dialogue and the institution of the screen, in the scenic system of gazes and visibilities. Such transversality implies a split up and a dialectic.²⁴

The screen that articulates the scenic device materializes this split up: on the side of the “spot of light” there is the Thing, which holds an immediate, brutal, compulsive and revolted relationship with the symbolic; on the side of the “point of intersection” there is the subject of representation, which is mediated by the rules and frames of representation, whether this mediation takes place in the order of discourse, by means of rhetoric and decorum, or in the order of image making, by means of perspective and the codes of scenic representation.

23. “[F]or, let me tell you, I don’t care a fig for linguistics. What I am directly interested in is language, because I think it is *that* that I have to deal with in my practice of psychoanalysis. It is the business of the linguists to define the linguistic object. In the sciences, each field progresses from defining its object. They define it as they understand it and they add that I make a metaphorical use of it. (Jacques Lacan, *Séminaire XVIII, D’un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*, 1971 (Paris, Seuil, 2006) 45) It is the same accusation of being arbitrarily metaphorical that has been borne, in its beginnings in Toulouse, against the theory of operative devices. Because the modeling of the scenic operative device postulates the collapse of the logics of discourse, in the scene, the language of the text ceases to be discursive language, and must of necessity be described metaphorically, from the instruments and visual categories it is using. Each time a new epistemological field comes into existence, the metaphorical nature of the new concepts and the suspicion of arbitrariness that their use suscitates from its elders are unavoidable. Even when the older, institutional field pretends to be newer than the new one, which the institution is incapable of assimilating...

24. Stéphane Lojkine, *Image et subversion* (Paris: J. Chambon, 2005) 87-91 and 2nd part, “Le dédoublement symbolique”.

In the extract from Flaubert, the prisoners' howl and the white Thing, but also the desire for Frédéric which has pushed Louise to send Catherine in search for him, do not belong only to the order of phantasm, of impulse, of imaginary fascination and abjection. On the contrary, they serve to set the very principles of the symbolic, the Revolution on one side and marriage on the other, those two realities in the order of the symbolic that Père Roque refuses to see.

To those symbolic principles, which are manifested as Thing, spot of light and symptom, is opposed the symbolic institution of language, the verbal scene that Père Roque and his daughter play for each other, with its deceitful dialogue and its bourgeois decorum. The symbolic institution however can make a stand against the symbolic principle only because it proceeds from it: the bourgeois republic proceeds from the revolution, the loving daughter's little game proceeds from Louise's desire for Frédéric, Père Roque's indigestion proceeds from the shot fired in the Tuileries. The scenic procedure consists in turning the symbolic institution upside down, that is in calling back the symbolic principle and thus causing the defeat of the symbolic institution. This turning upside down, this revolt, is operated from the screen of representation: the vent-hole in the Tuileries, the house front in the rue Saint-Martin and, to crown it all, Père Roque's face about to throw up his soup.

Here, therefore the screen appears as a third instance of the symbolic, articulating the institution and the symbolic principle. In the space of the scene, the screen structures the representation by establishing a difference between a before and a beyond, thus a polarity generating a semiotic system. The principle, the institution and the screen are visually manifested in the scenic device and they make us immediately sensitive to the different layers and articulations of the operative device of representation. But outside the scene, within the unfolding of the narrative itself, they keep operating, though in a non visual form: the fiction understood as a world, the narration defined as succession of events and the overall structure of the narrative are the abstract forms of the Thing, the discourse and the screen.

What is at stake in these modelizations of the scene and of the narrative as operative devices is the possibility to account not only for the fundamentally layered dimension of the symbolic, but also for the right about-turn, the revolt, that any representation, be it ever so apparently consensual, or commercial, and even and above all when it is aristocratic and proper, operates from these layers. This will lead us, in psychoanalysis, to such a radical reconsideration of the symbolic constitution of the subject as Lacan himself has constantly been practising, first with the Thing, *das Ding*, in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, and then with the symptom in the last seminars. Aren't the Thing and symptom precisely what Flaubert invites us to contemplate, with this "something white" which, decidedly, "couldn't go down"?