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DANS CHE VUOI ? 2004/1 (N° 21), PAGES 151 À 156

ÉDITIONS L'HARMATTAN

ISSN 0994-2424

ISBN 2747565459

DOI 10.3917/chev.021.0151

Article disponible en ligne à l'adresse

<https://www.cairn.info/revue-che-vuoi-1-2004-1-page-151.htm>



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An ex-eyety : a lacanian signifier ?¹

Josette Zoueïn

In a virtual dictionary, of *unheimlich*, we read the following :

- An exciety* : *Anxiety between vinegar and acid.*
An egg-sighty : *See Histoire de l'œil, by Georges Bataille.*
Anex-eyety : *Clairvoyance ; Organs donatini.*
An ex-eyety : *See Sandman ; See The Merchant and the Genie.*
An ex-sighty : *Oedipus ; King Lear ; Last session of a Lacanian analysis.*
An x eye-eaty : *See The devouring eye, by Roger Caillois.*
An Xeyety : *Because artists in general and painters in particular, make it possible to see what is not to be seen.*
Un ex-eyety : *The ethics in The Merchant and the Genie, in The Thousand and One Nights.*

Selon Lacan, ce n'est pas l'homo homini lupus mais la jouissance qui constitue le lien le plus primitif entre le sujet et l'Autre...

(M. Safouan)

The eye is not satisfied with seeing.

(Ecclesiastes 1, 8)

In his commentary on Freud's *unheimlich*², Lacan notes the importance given by Freud to the linguistic analysis of the concept *Uncanny*. This is a fact which, from his point of view, justifies the importance which he conferred on the function of the signifier. Here, Lacan seems to be asking : « Was Freud a Lacanian, *avant la lettre* ? »

In an attempt to stay nearer to a clinical and dialectical orientation of psychoanalytic concepts, Lacan often noted how much he appreciated the English version of Freud's works. He said he found

the translation truly « expressive » and the language « beautiful ». The lack which he found in the French translation seems to have forced him in many of his seminars to resort to English terminology. It is as if the Freud of Maresfield Gardens had never stopped inspiring him to search for the best wording that he could possibly have. And, for that matter, we believe that *les mots anglais de Jacques Lacan* have still to be written³.

The Congress held in Dublin on the subject of *Anxiety and its Coordinates* (November, 1995) has certainly played a role in the elaboration of what follows. As I live in France, and my home is even further away, down from the Mediterranean Sea (in the Lebanon), it is easy to note that the Irish articulate English in a specific manner, reminding us of what Petillon said on Synge :

La langue de Synge va être de travailler la langue anglaise au corps pour parvenir à cette « note bleue » qui serait l'inflexion proprement irlandaise où s'approprier la langue greffée.⁴

The equivalent of *Anxiety* in French is *Angoisse*. In English, it resonates as « An ex-eyety ». If to translate (*traduire*) is to go from one language to another, then « an ex-eyety » is not affected by the process, rather, « to transhear » (*tradouïre*), would seem much more appropriate. It is, indeed, a different way of saying that the « unconscious is structured like a language », or that it is a certain way of writing the knotting of the subject, the body and the letter.

Have we not read about the history of writing and what it postulates...

...que la séparation des mots – les blancs de l'écriture, qui nous semblent tellement évidents aujourd'hui – est une invention apparue au VII^e siècle en Irlande et en Angleterre, et un peu plus tard en France, qui a considérablement modifié le rapport du lecteur au texte lu.⁵

Séparations or blanks within a word itself gives the word « anxiety », in a chemical or analytic operation, a modern look and, in a different way, a Lacanian resonance. Hoffman's tale *The Sandman* points to the importance of the eye in the phenomenon of *Unheimlich* whose manifestations the author treated almost as personae. Was not *Nathaniel* blind in the bible? *Olympia*, the doll with « dull eyes »? *Clara*, a clairvoyant? And *Coppelius*⁶ (as Freud observed in a footnote that, according to Rank *coppa* means « orbit »), transparent in the look? As far as « Sand » is concerned, does that not evoke the crystalline lens of the eye itself? While Freud refers in this context to castration by the Father, Lacan makes it clear that the problem concerns *jouissance*.

*Qu'est-ce qu'un tableau ?*⁷ Lacan insists on the distinction between the eye and the gaze. On the whole, the gaze has a pacifying side, the

eye is nothing but « bad eye », noting its mortal function and its power of separation, especially in a Mediterranean culture. *The Thousand and One Nights* deals with Uncanny, destiny and how the subject tries to cope with all that, simply by telling stories. Princess Shahrazad was supposed to be killed by the Prince who, deceived by womankind, decided that each night he would kill one young, beautiful maiden, after spending a night with her. The Princess for her part decided to tell the Prince a story, so beautiful and so thrilling, that the Prince would suspend his decision to kill her, while waiting for the outcome of the story. And that is precisely what happened.

Another of these fairytales entitled *The Merchant and the Genie*⁸, evokes the seminar on Anxiety. There too we will find the notions of the Uncanny, the desire of the Other, the eye and ethics. The story goes as follows :

A merchant, a good Muslim, coming back home after a long trip, stops under a tree, near a fountain, to eat some dates. Throwing left and right the pips of the fruit, he suddenly sees a Genie emerging from the earth, ready to kill him : the pips had hit his son in the eye and killed him. Surprised, as he had not seen anyone, nor indeed had he intended to kill anyone, the merchant pleads to go home and spend a final year with his family before coming back for the sentence. One year later, returning to the same place, he meets an old man to whom he relates the events. « By the Lord, I admire your keeping your word (*la parole donnée*), and I find your story extraordinary. If we could write it with a needle in the inner corner of the eye, it would give food for thought to he who knows how to think », said the old man. And when the Genie finally showed up to kill the merchant, the old man, in order to suspend the Genie's decision, told a story much more beautiful than either the merchant's adventure or that of the Genie and in that fashion, the merchant is spared.

The merchant is the subject. As a merchant, he deals with objects (merchandise). Primary narcissism, that is, killing with words, is shown in the fact he could actually kill someone (the other) with the pips of dates which, in relation to words, correspond to oral objects.

The merchant said that he did not « see ». Lacan wrote that the « subject » is presented as other than he is, and what one shows him is not what he wishes to see. It is in this way the eye may function as *objet a*, that is to say, at the level of a lack (-φ).⁹

The Genie represents the Other. Throwing the pips left and right, killing the Genie's son by his *jouissance*, the merchant begins to learn about his debt to the Other. For man's desire is the desire of the Other, and here it is *in* the Other, as Lacan taught in the lesson of 5th December 1962, during his seminar on Anxiety¹⁰.

The tale is situated in a medieval Muslim culture where the mirror as object does not exist: it is even forbidden as an image. Nevertheless, here the mirror is suggested by the « fountain » (Narcissus) which, in Arabic, is homonymous with the « eye », that is to say the eye is a mirror in itself, and is able to contain an image.

To be « reached in (or by) an eye », literally means to be affected by the « bad eye », whose consequence is invariably, misfortune or death... a good reason why, in the Mediterranean, children generally put on a little blue amulet (*contre-œil*), a little porcelain eye (like Olympia) in order to keep the « bad eye » away. This is the merchant's destiny regarding the Genie's son. The child reached in the eye becomes the double of the subject ! Let us hear Lacan on *Nathaniel* in *The Sandman* :

*But the doll in question... is properly the image in the operation of completing it by what is in the very form of the story absolutely distinguished, namely the eye. And the eye involved can only be that of the hero of the story. The theme of this eye which is to be stolen from him is what gives the explanatory thread to the whole story.*¹¹

When speaking, the merchant engages himself with the Other. « To give one's word » (*donner sa parole*), is a symbolic exchange between human beings. « I give you my word, my signifier and, in return, you give me a one year's life delay ! » – is the formula of the exchange. But it is also a way to say how much the subject's life depends on the Other, and on his signifiers « attached » to the Other. Can a word be equivalent to a life ? Better than that, speaking separates one from death. As a last resort, time itself is an object which can become obsolete (*caduc*), cut by death, as the subject himself who, by possessing objects (merchandise), metonymically becomes this object in the desire of the Other.

If the Genie has decided to kill the merchant, one can still wonder why the merchant accepts the sentence. Why would he come back ? He came back because of his condition of alienation. Lacan developed this idea of alienation using the notion of the veil of alienation in *Le sujet et l'Autre : l'Aliénation*¹². This is an Hegelian moment of terror where, in the very condition that separates freedom from death, the subject proves to be free to choose death ! This is the « lethal factor » (*le facteur léthal*). This is Alienation.

The metaphor of the exile of the subject from his subjectivity is understood from what precedes it. But also with his coming back home to his loved ones and his leaving home, wife, sons, and goods... This is exile : not to be in one's place, to be deported from one's subjectivity : for subjectivity is the home of the subject, his country. But to be in a place where we are not anymore, a subject is on the

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scene of the Other, l'endroit où le réel se presse à cette scène de l'autre où l'homme comme sujet a à se constituer¹³.

The Merchant and the Genie was commented on by A. Kilito¹⁴. *Ça le regarde* is the moral of the story. The teaching of the old man is that from the moment when the merchant accepted the sentence, there was « an eye in his eye ». The author also noted the similarity which exists between « to write » and « to sew », in Arabic language.

Finally, we can say that the subject was ready to pay the price for his *jouissance*. Through his journey in the desire of the Other, and from that date on, he is no longer the same, no longer the merchant who « does not see ». The needle is necessary because he was « mutilated » in the kernel of his being which is represented by the eye. The needle will make a trace, will « sew » as a writing, a symbolic inscription, a knowledge. And the eye, *cet espace ouvert de tout côté à la jouissance*, becomes a barred eye when the lack is stitched to the body.

While Freud interprets anxiety by the Symbolic, that is, castration by the father, Lacan operates a shift : anxiety is concerned with the Real, that is, concerned with *jouissance*. To the ternary *Inhibition, Symptoms and Anxiety*, he opposes *jouissance* of the Other, Demand of the Other, Desire of the Analyst. The Real as *jouissance* integrates the structure.

Je relisais mon séminaire sur l'Éthique d'il y a quelques années, et cela pour renouveler le bien-fondé de ce que je crois y avoir articulé de sens essentiel après notre maître, Freud, que je crois avoir accentué d'une façon digne de la vérité dont il s'agit que toute morale est à chercher dans son principe, dans sa provenance, du côté du Réel !¹⁵

¹Translated from French (*An ex-eyety : un signifiant lacanien ?*) by Helen Sheehan.

²Lacan (J.), *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*. Book X. *Anxiety*, 1962-63, unpublished, trans. C. Gallagher, Lesson 5 december 1962.

³We refer to S. Mallarmé, « Les mots anglais », in *Œuvres complètes*, Paris, Gallimard, La Pléiade, 1945.

⁴Petillon (P. Y.), « En étrange pays, fragments d'une île », in *Un lieu : l'Irlande, Critique* n° 421-422, Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1982, p. 553.

⁵« Separation of words – that is, the blanks in writing, which seem so evident nowadays – is an invention which appeared in the seventh century in Ireland, then England, and much later in France. It considerably modified the relation between the reader and the text », Casanovas (B.), « De la voix au regard, du son à la lettre : la transcription », in *Voix et regards*, Actes, Orléans, Psypropops, 1991 (our translation).

⁶Freud (S.), « L'inquiétante étrangeté », in *Essais de psychanalyse appliquée*, Paris, Gallimard, 1933, p. 179.

⁷Lacan (J.), *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, Paris, Seuil, 1973, p. 105-109.

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⁸We refer to the French edition of *Les mille et une nuits*, traduction Antoine Galland, Paris, Garnier-Flammarion, 1965, p. 45-51.

⁹Lacan (J.), as quoted by Stephen J. Costello, « Lacan and the Lure of the Look », in *The Letter*, automne 1996, p. 40.

¹⁰In *Anxiety : Preserving the objet a*, H. Sheehan gives a clear synthesis of the *Seminar on Anxiety*, presenting *jouissance* as a « distraction », *The Letter*, Autumn 1966, p. 98.

¹¹Lacan (J.), *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, Book X. *Anxiety*, *op. cit.*, Lesson 5 December 1962.

¹²Lacan (J.), *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, *op. cit.*, p. 185-195.

¹³Lacan (J.), *Seminar on Anxiety*, *op. cit.*, Lesson 29 May 1963.

¹⁴Kilito (A.), *L'Œil et l'aiguille*, Paris, La Découverte, 1992, p. 104-111.

¹⁵Lacan (J.), *Seminar on Anxiety*, *op. cit.*, Lesson 27 February 1963.