

LACAN'S *ÉCRITS* REVISITED: ON WRITING AS OBJECT OF DESIRE

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Summary: This essay is intended as a scholarly contribution to the construction of a detailed biography of Lacan's 1966 *Écrits*, which is conceived here as a living entity whose influence continues to radiate around the world, within as well as outside psychoanalytic circles. Documenting and re-evaluating the historical circumstances presiding over the book's gestation, birth and coming of age, the essay first argues that, despite the multiplicity inscribed in its title, Lacan's volume constitutes an integrated unity rather than a mere collection of disparate papers written over a period of thirty-odd years, albeit a unity that is fundamentally incomplete. Subsequent to this, it is proposed that Lacan's choice of title (*Écrits*, writings) occasioned the crystallisation of his own theory of the letter, writing and (knowledge) transmission. Even though this theory was already contained *in statu nascendi* in two of the papers collected in *Écrits*, it was only through a process of deferred action that Lacan came to appreciate its significance. Aligning writing with the object *a*, as cause of desire, Lacan's theory both underpinned his opposition to Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of logocentrism (and his concurrent promotion of writing as a primordial trace), and informed his own protracted consideration of the transmission of psychoanalytic knowledge during the 1970s via a series of (mathematical and topological) writings.

Keywords: Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, writing, object *a*, desire, transmission

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Maybe it was a patent case of morphogenetic resonance *avant la lettre*. Maybe it was a mere occurrence of simple acausal synchronicity. Whether on 15 November 1966 the undead soul of Carl Gustav Jung whispered ever so softly into the young ears of Rupert Sheldrake, analytical psychology gradually giving birth to formative causation, fact of the matter is that this remarkable Tuesday was a day of three mighty crashes—two of which carefully planned, a third definitely unplanned, two pre-scheduled and eagerly anticipated, a third totally

1. This essay is an expanded version of a Keynote Lecture presented at the International Conference on Lacan's *Écrits*, University of Ghent, 21 September 2018. I am grateful to Stijn Vanheule for inviting me to speak and for his comments on a first draft of the text.

unexpected, yet all three of these equally memorable and momentous. In the early hours of the morning, cargo flight Pan Am 708 departing from Frankfurt with destination Berlin crashed on initial approach in what was then Eastern Germany, 15 kilometres from the landing strip at Tegel airport, killing all its three crew members. Some 16 hours later, the American spacecraft Gemini 12 splashed down in the North Atlantic Ocean, less than 5 kilometres off target, after which the two crew members were safely picked up by a US aircraft carrier. Both events made newspaper headlines around the world the following day, totally obfuscating the third crash, even though in many ways the latter would prove equally pivotal and consequential. If there is any truth in Jacques Dutronc's lyrical portrayal of Paris as waking up at 5 AM, the third probably already happened in the French capital quite some time before daybreak, yet various other cities in the provinces and around Europe would not have been spared the tremendous impact of a thumping doorstep, landing in huge quantities and colonising large amounts of precious shelf space. For all I know, when the colossal paper scatter bomb inscribed *Écrits* (Lacan, 1966a) landed in the bookshops on 15 November 1966, it did not cause any casualties, yet no one could have predicted its triggering a small intellectual tsunami, at least in the francophone world, whose ripples would still be felt fifty years later.²

For all its explosive contents and its humongous size, Jacques Lacan's *Écrits* would have looked surprisingly plain to anyone daring to approach it and mustering the strength to pick it up. White as mortal sin graciously forgiven, with no image or drawing teasing or enticing the reader, it was as if the hefty tome was afraid to disclose itself, drawing an unadorned ivory veil over its heavy haecceity, compelling curious hands to look for tell-tale signs elsewhere, or forcing scrutinizing eyes to discern themselves in the central space of the white

2. According to the French weekly news magazine *Le nouvel observateur*, 5,000 copies of *Écrits* were sold within a fortnight, and before any reviews of the book had appeared in the press (Loriot, 1966: 37). In the first volume of his monumental *History of Structuralism*, François Dosse reports that by 1984 sales for *Écrits* had reached 36,000 copies (Dosse, 1997[1991]: 317). By 1993, when Élisabeth Roudinesco published her intellectual biography of Lacan, the single-volume had sold more than 50,000 copies, whereas the two volumes of the paperback edition (Lacan, 1970; 1971), which includes a generous selection of newly revised essays extracted from the single-volume, had reached sales of over 120,000 for the first and over 55,000 for the second (Roudinesco, 1997[1993]: 328). By contrast, the truncated English edition of *Écrits* which appeared in 1977 under the prestigious Tavistock imprint (Lacan, 1977) failed to attract a large readership, with the inevitable repercussion that the publishing company declined to take on any additional Lacan-translations (Smith, 1981). Speaking at a press conference in Rome on 29 October 1974, Lacan himself conceded that the overnight success of his *Écrits* had come as a total surprise to him, and that he did not understand how it could have happened (Lacan, 2013[2005]: 69).

paper canvas. Inviting both projection and reflection, the volume's uncannily empty cover was the learned man's intellectual equivalent of the die-cut opening with the mirroring foil Uriah Heep would subsequently come to employ for their third studio album, or perhaps more fittingly of the plain white sleeve the fab four would use, almost exactly two years later, for their weighty ninth release. Equally uncommon for a book, its front cover featured the name of its author twice, once at the top and once at the bottom, once in red and once in black, once in the same large font as the name of the publisher, and once in a smaller font, just above the name of the publisher—the name of the author thus repeated, although not exactly in the same way, as if one mention would not have been sufficient as an index of authorial ownership and intentionality.³

More than any other cover, this doubly inscribed signboard infesting the French bookshops on that fateful morning of 15 November would have probably instigated an involuntary volte-face, from front to back in a quick and easy sleight of hand. There, in what the French call "*la quatrième de couverture*", and what is designated in English rather more prosaically as the 'back cover', more whiteness would await, yet now with a duplicated and colour-changed title and an anonymous précis, which was as much an explicit injunction to the reader as it was a succinct description of the volume's *raison d'être*. Turning the book around, like a leisurely browser checking out the song titles of an album after having admired its cover, here is what interested, intrigued or bemused minds would discover.⁴

3. Interestingly, the two volumes of the paperback edition have been (re-)released with a number of different covers over the years, ranging from abstract circles with a 'bend sinister' to photographs of Lacan himself, the latter again doubling the name of the author, although now with an image of his persona.

4. This précis was not included in the English translation of Lacan's *Écrits* (Lacan, 2006[1966]a), and to the best of my knowledge it has never been made available in English elsewhere. The text provided here was originally translated by Bruce Fink for his complete English translation of *Écrits*, and I am grateful to him for putting it at my disposal. Even though the précis is written in the third person and does not carry the name of an author, Lacan took away any doubt that he himself had composed it in the session of 12 May 1971 of his seminar *D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*, as well as in the published version of the essay entitled 'Lituraterre', which he read out on that occasion. In the seminar session, he stated: "As for me, if I propose Poe's text [Edgar Allan Poe's 1844 short story 'The Purloined Letter'], with all that is behind it, to psychoanalysis, it is precisely insofar as psychoanalysis cannot approach it without showing its failure. This is how I shed light on psychoanalysis, and it's already known, because it's on the back of my volume [*Écrits*], how in this way I also invoke the Enlightenment" (Lacan, 2006: 116). In 'Lituraterre', these lines appear as: "As for me, if I propose to psychoanalysis the letter as being in abeyance [*en souffrance*], it is because it [psychoanalysis] shows its failure there. And it is through this that I shed light on it [psychoanalysis]: when I invoke in this way the

One must read this collection cover to cover to realise that a single debate is engaged in here. Should it seem dated, it proves nevertheless to be that of the Enlightenment.

For there is a field in which dawn itself is late in coming: the field that runs the gamut from a bias of which psychopathology has not rid itself to the falsely self-evident nature of the ego, used to flaunt its existence.

Obscurity passes itself off as an object in this field and flourishes through the obscurantism that finds anew its values in it. It is no wonder, then, that it is precisely in this field that people resist the discovery of Freud, a term that may be extended here on the basis of an amphibology: the discovery of Freud by Jacques Lacan.

The reader will learn what is demonstrated here, which is that the unconscious comes under pure logic—in other words, under the signifier. Epistemology will always be lacking here unless it undertakes a reform that is the subversion of the subject. Its advent can only be produced really and in a place that is currently occupied by psychoanalysts.

For fifteen years, Jacques Lacan has been transcribing this subversion for analysts on the basis of their everyday experience. The thing is of too much concern to everyone not to make a ruckus. With these writings [*écrits*], Lacan enjoins us to ensure that this subversion not be hijacked by the culture industry.

At the risk of straying into slightly self-indulgent, and always already fictionalised autobiographical reminiscences, when I assimilated these words for the first time in the original French, back in the mist of time, some time during the Autumn of 1984, I had absolutely no idea what they meant. But then again, as Lacan himself intimated in the opening paragraph, a proper appreciation of the nature and the stakes of the debate would have required my having read the entire volume, from beginning to end, all 900-odd pages of it. Inquisitive as I am, I followed Lacan's unequivocal exhortation to read. Thirty-five years later I'm still as curious as I was back then, and I'm still reading, occasionally wondering what I missed, or whether I should re-read what I have already read numerous times over. In all sincerity, despite endless re-readings, I still cannot claim that I fully comprehend what

Enlightenment, it is to demonstrate where it [psychoanalysis] constitutes a *hole*" (Lacan, 2013[1971]a: 329). In the alternative English translation of 'Lituraterre', by B. Khiara-Foxton and A. Price, this sentence is rendered without the nouns 'psychoanalysis' in the first two instances above, although Lacan himself added these when he read the text in his seminar, as a result of which the English (as much as the original French) is profoundly ambiguous: "For my part, when I propose to psychoanalysis the letter as pending it is because it shows itself to fail therein. And it is in this way that I shed light on it: when I call upon the enlightenment [sic] in this way it is to demonstrate where psychoanalysis forms a *hole*" (Lacan, 2013[1971]b: 31). The ambiguity, here, is that one may erroneously conclude that it is the letter which fails (and thus forms a hole), which is precisely why Lacan felt it necessary to clarify the sentence in his seminar. That this kind of mis-reading may affect established French Lacanians too, is demonstrated by Laurent (2013[1999]), who rather embarrassingly goes so far as to develop an entire theory of the letter *qua* hole, despite the fact that to Lacan the hole was not on the side of the letter at all, but only to be situated firmly on the side of psychoanalysis. Throughout this essay, translations from foreign-language sources are mine, unless otherwise noted.

Lacan was trying to convey here, from which culture industry he was trying to rescue his subversion, and to which persistently obscure field he had addressed his *Fiat Lux*.

Be that as it may, the back cover of *Écrits* indicates that Lacan placed his book unequivocally under the aegis of the Enlightenment, a statement which many a reader would no doubt have acknowledged, and probably long before having scrutinised the volume from cover to cover, as supremely ironic, given that what appears to reign supreme in these 900 pages, from beginning to end, presents itself as being exactly the opposite. Rather than signalling the end of obscurity, and celebrating the long-awaited arrival of a new dawn, *Écrits* would seem to take its readers on an O'Neillian or Célinesque voyage into the darkest depths of the night, towards an intellectual hadopelagic zone, where eternal blackness reigns and where no ordinary mortal is sufficiently well equipped to find his bearings, let alone survive.⁵ Returning to the empty white expanse on the book's front cover and choosing, as other publishers undoubtedly would have done, a suitable work of art to fill in the blank space—capturing a key feature of what lies beneath the surface, and inflaming the reader's imagination—it would thus not be Eugène Delacroix's "Liberty Leading the People", as a pictorial emblem of the French Enlightenment tradition, that imposes itself, but the undisputed highlight of Suprematism, Kazimir Malevich's infamous "Black Square" (Figure 1).

5. It is worth emphasizing, here, that the inaccessibility of Lacan's writings is not a culturally or historically contingent feature, conditioned by specific circumstances, such as the reader not being French or not being a psychoanalyst, but an immanent characteristic, which was acknowledged in equal measure by Lacan's contemporaries and even by those people operating in his circle of intimates. For example, on 26 November 1953, Daniel Lagache, the president of the newly established *Société française de Psychanalyse* (SFP), wrote a letter to his friend Michael Balint in which he commented on Lacan's report at the inaugural conference of the SFP in Rome: "On the whole, the report was considered difficult to read, but it nonetheless contains interesting and even important ideas. I hope to make a de-poeticized and more conceptual transcription of it, and to distribute these ideas to a larger audience" (Lagache, 1953). Many years later, Claude Lévi-Strauss told Didier Éribon in an interview that he often discussed the matter of reading Lacan with Maurice Merleau-Ponty, but that they always arrived at the conclusion that it would have taken them five or six readings to understand the text, and that time was just too short for that (Lévi-Strauss & Éribon, 2001[1990]: 109-110).

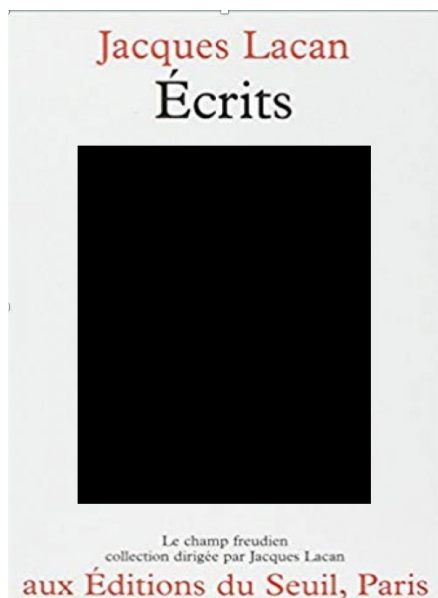


Figure 1

And what are we supposed to make of the book's peculiar title? In her *Lacan: In Spite of Everything*, Élisabeth Roudinesco averred that Lacan's volume resembles both Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* (de Saussure, 1960[1916]) and Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel, 2018[1807]) as a summa which constitutes "the founding Book [*sic*] of an intellectual system" (Roudinesco, 2014[2011]: 99). Whereas I broadly agree with the status Roudinesco accords to it, I respectfully disagree with the comparisons that are being made, irrespective of the fact that neither Saussure's nor Hegel's book refer to writing (*écrit; écriture*) in their titles. For although it is self-evident that Saussure's book was written, it was not actually written by himself, but by Charles Bally and Albert Séchehaye, two of his students, based on lecture notes. As to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, this was written over a very short period of time, which partly explains why the substance of the book is measurably less well developed than its preface and introduction.

Restricting myself to the title of Lacan's doorstep, there is a small handful of books in French with exactly the same title (see, for example, Ensor, 1950; Rigaut, 1970; Malevitch, 1975; Janáček, 2009; Munch, 2011). What unites these books, in all their diversity, is that they constitute posthumous collections of written texts by people who are

primarily known for creative accomplishments other than writing (in painting, music, or poetry for instance). In other words, the title *Écrits* is meant to retain the reader's interest, here, purely by virtue of the fact that the author is not primarily recognised as a writer. Whenever the title *Écrits* is employed to describe a collection of works by established authors of fiction or non-fiction, it is generally expanded through the addition of a classifying adjective denoting a unifying quality of the writings presented, as in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Écrits de jeunesse* (Sartre, 1990), or Victor Hugo's *Écrits politiques* (Hugo, 2002). In this case, *Écrits* would not suffice as a descriptive noun for the book's contents, precisely because the author is already principally known for being a writer.

In simply calling the book *Écrits*, the author, publisher and/or editor thus decided that the title did not have to be about anything at all for the book to be about something specific, because the name of the author, who was not directly associated with writing, somehow guaranteed the contents of the volume and the subject under discussion. Speaking about his intellectual trajectory to trainee psychiatrists in Bordeaux on 20 April 1967, Lacan disclosed that he himself had chosen the title of his book:

I collected together something I had to call *Écrits*, in the plural, because it seemed to me that that was the simplest term to designate what I was going to do. I brought together under that title the things I had written just to put down a few markers, a few milestones, like the posts they drive into the water to moor boats to, in what I had been teaching on a weekly basis for twenty years or so . . . In the course of those long years of teaching, from time to time I composed an *écrit* and it seemed to me important to put it there like a pylon to mark a stage, the point we had reached in some year, some period in some year. Then I put it all together. It happened in a context in which things had gained ground since the time when I started out in teaching (Lacan, 2008[2005]: 60-61).⁶

On 12 May 1971, when Lacan delivered 'Lituraterre' at his weekly seminar in Paris, he further disclosed to his audience that his title *Écrits* was effectively "more ironic than one might think: when it concerns either reports, a function of Conferences, or let's say 'open letters' where I bring into question a facet of my teaching" (Lacan, 2013[1971]:

6. Lacan emphasized that the title is in the plural, because the last letter 's' of the word *Écrits* is silent when spoken, and the plural would only be heard when the word is preceded by a possessive pronoun, as in '*mes Écrits*' or '*nos Écrits*'.

328).⁷ Hence, the essays collected in *Écrits* had allegedly fallen out of Lacan's weekly teaching to psychoanalytic trainees, or out of his presentations at conferences and his public lectures, as the tangible material residues of an ephemeral discourse, with the proviso that in some cases the texts had been prepared before, and with the explicit purpose of being read out loud.⁸

On 9 January 1973, at the very beginning of a lecture on 'the function of the written' (*la fonction de l'écrit*)—although this title would have been added afterwards, notably when the lecture was written up for publication—Lacan conceded that when it came to choosing a title for his book, he could not think of anything better than to call it *Écrits* (Lacan, 1998[1975]: 26). I have no good reason to think that Lacan was disingenuous when he said he had not been able to come up with anything else, much as he was broadly correct in saying that most of the texts included in the book had originally been written for conferences, or published as meticulous distillations of one or the other aspect of his teaching. However, there is no doubt in my mind that the publisher accepted Lacan's suggestion, because they knew very well that, in the Autumn of 1966, he was already sufficiently well-known—although not as a writer—for this book of writings to find a readership in the absence of a more specific title, or indeed that the very lack of a specific title would effectively increase the book's appeal, because both in name and in size it would suggest a more or less complete summa (to use Roudinesco's term) of the author's work. After all, except for the book's Appendix I, which included the transcript of a presentation by France's pre-eminent Hegel-scholar Jean Hyppolite on Freud's paper 'Negation' (Freud, 1961[1925]) at Lacan's seminar in February 1954 (Hyppolite 2006[1956]), and some ancillary materials by Jacques-Alain Miller, all the texts in the book had effectively been written by Lacan,

7. Lacan had already made a similar point in a letter to Winnicott of 5 August 1960, and thus some six years before the publication of *Écrits*: "Everything that I have written in the last seven years takes on value solely in the context of my teaching" (Lacan, 1990[1960]: 77).

8. This applies, for example, to 'Presentation on Psychical Causality' (Lacan, 2006[1947]), 'Presentation on Transference' (Lacan, 2006[1952]), 'Psychoanalysis and Its Teaching' (Lacan, 2006[1957]b) and 'The Signification of the Phallus' (Lacan, 2006[1958]). The admission that his *écrits* were largely remnants, or indeed 'waste-products' of his lectures, also emboldened Lacan on various occasions to refer to the publication of *Écrits* as a 'poubelliciation', i.e. a 'binification', 'trashification' or 'garbagification'. See, for example, Lacan (1965-'66, session of 15 December 1965), Lacan (2001[1968]: 344) and Lacan (2018[2011]: 195).

so to call it *Écrits* may have been slightly vague and a trifle highfalutin, but nonetheless unquestionably truthful and indisputably accurate.⁹

However, all of this should not detract us from reconsidering the relationship (and the disparity) between the book's short and snappy title (one single word) and its everything but short and snappy contents (some 375,900 words). The first thing to note, is that *Écrits*, at least when written, is visibly plural, so that the book's content has not only been written, but *de facto* includes a multiplicity of writings. Anyone who has ever picked up a copy of Lacan's book, whether in the original French or in translation, and who has looked at its Table of Contents, which appears at the very end in the original edition and (for some strange reason) at the very beginning in the English translation, will have been able to acknowledge this, so much so that my point probably comes across as blatantly obvious at best and totally stupid at worst. Nonetheless, and distinctly counterintuitive as it may seem, I wish to argue that the multiplicity inscribed by Lacan in his book's title, and which appears both at the front and at the back, is by far the most deceptive aspect of its name. Multiple, plural and manifold in its writing, the book is singular, monadic and unitary in its written presentation, although this should not be taken to imply that it is complete, finished and definitive. Put differently, although the title *Écrits* clearly suggests plurality when written, and Lacan himself referred to his work as a collection (*un recueil*) on the back cover and in his introduction to it (Lacan, 2006[1966]b), what landed with a loud bang in the French bookshops on 15 November 1966 is far from a jumbled miscellany, a Gallic smorgasbord or an intellectual liquorice all-sorts. Lacan's ingredients may have been produced over a period of thirty-odd years, when it came to pulling them out of their original soil and allowing them to supplement each other in a rich psychoanalytic broth, Lacan showed himself to be an excellent restaurateur, carefully re-cooking and re-balancing his diversified produce to create a coherent and consistent *plat de résistance*, quelling the reader's appetite with a gigantic dish of many different components and a wide variety of flavours, none of which were supposed to show their exact age or even their precise origin. *Écrits* was released in November 1966, and 1966

9. Hyppolite's text was originally published in the first issue of the journal 'La psychanalyse' (Hyppolite, 1956). Following its inclusion in Lacan's *Écrits*, it was reprinted in the first volume of Hyppolite's collected writings, which were published three years after his death with the subtitle *écrits* (Hyppolite, 1971[1956]). Apart from the English translation included in Lacan's *Écrits*, another English translation, by John Forrester, features as an appendix to the English translation of Lacan's *Seminar I* (Lacan, 1988[1975]; Hyppolite, 1988[1956]), despite the fact that it does not appear in the original French edition.

was to be the time of the book, even though some of its ideas went as far back as the mid-1930s.

To make my argument more persuasive and compelling, I can refer to four distinct features of *Écrits* which have attracted relatively little attention, or at least less interest than its more substantive components, i.e. the constitutive writings in themselves. First, avoiding the standard template of a conventional compilation, Lacan interspersed the essays selected for inclusion in the volume with five ‘connecting texts’ and two addenda, four of which explicitly dated 1966, yet all clearly written when the book was under construction.¹⁰ As historicizing and contextualising essays, these inter- or binding texts function as conceptual bridges between and within the initial sections of the volume, and could therefore be considered part of the cement that keeps the edifice together. Indeed, when in mid-October 1966, Jacques Lacan was introduced to another, ever so slightly brilliant Jacques, and went on to confess to Derrida that he was primarily concerned that his forthcoming collection might not hold up (*ça ne va pas tenir*) (Derrida 1998[1996]: 52), one should not just interpret Lacan’s trepidation literally, as an ostensibly futile or deviously exaggerated concern over the quality of the binding, but equally and perhaps more importantly as an entirely justifiable worry that his book would not be able to stand up, would not fall into place, might be falling apart, would not hang together, especially compared to those of his ‘structuralist’ rivals Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, Barthes, Greimas, Genette and Todorov, all of whom had released important works earlier in 1966 (Lévi-Strauss, 1973[1966]; Foucault, 1970[1966]; Barthes, 1987[1966]; Greimas, 1983[1966]; Genette, 1966; Todorov, 1966), and most definitely compared to that one big book which had elicited nothing short of one hell of a tantrum—Paul Ricœur’s *De l’interprétation. Essai sur Freud* (Ricœur, 1970[1965]). With his ‘binding texts’, Lacan wanted to ensure that his *Écrits* would not come across as a mere anthology, or what in the Anglophone publishing world is sometimes called ‘a reader’ (notice the term), but that it would be recognised, despite the format, as a monograph, in which one debate and one argument is being pursued—as Lacan himself was at great pains to emphasize on his back cover.

10. Only five of these seven texts are included in the book’s Table of Contents, where in both the French and the English versions of *Écrits* they have been italicized. It should be noted that I am not referring to the appendices, here, which must be considered separately. I am also discounting the 1966 introduction to ‘Position of the Unconscious’ (Lacan, 2006[1966]c).

Second, with very few exceptions, all of the texts included in *Écrits* were revised and modified by Lacan prior to their being reprinted.¹¹ Occasionally, Lacan would draw the reader's attention to the fact that one or more paragraphs had been re-written anno 1966, as is the case for instance with 'The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis', his 1953 'Rome Discourse' (Lacan, 2006[1956]: 267), or that he had added a new note, as with the long topological footnote to the text on psychosis (Lacan, 2006[1959]: 486-487), yet in most cases the alterations were performed in silence, without the reader being informed. Taken account of the fact that, when Lacan undertook this task, he was not just correcting typographical errors, adding cross-references, or updating bibliographical details, but regularly modifying the conceptual texture and scope of his essays, the reader of *Écrits* thus needs to know, yet most probably would not have known and many undoubtedly still don't know, that s/he is reading essays whose date of composition is *de facto* 1966, regardless of the fact that their original publication date may have been thirty or twenty years earlier.

Third, apart from a name index and a list of Freudian concepts in German, *Écrits* contained an index of concepts like no other, and which may very well still be unique in the history of scholarly publishing. Compiled by a twenty-two-year-old *normalien* by the name of Jacques-Alain Miller, who would go on to marry Lacan's youngest daughter three days before the publication of *Écrits*, this 'Classified Index of the Major Concepts' is by no stretch of the imagination an index in the common sense of the word, and I would be extremely surprised if anyone—casual reader or devoted scholar, psychoanalyst or student—had ever employed it in this way. As Miller himself indicated in an extended clarification for the reader, his 'index' constituted an 'order' and a 'system' which, although it reflects an interpretation, was designed to encapsulate and convey "the one ideology Lacan theorizes" (Miller, 2006[1966]: 852). In other words, if there is and always would be a certain chronology pervading the logic and progression of Lacan's book, Miller's 'index' purported to demonstrate that the intellectual developments over time were driven by one solid set of theoretical principles, whose architecture he proposed to set out.

11. The exceptions are those texts that had never been published before—"The Signification of the Phallus" (Lacan, 2006[1958]) and 'The Subversion of the Subject' (Lacan, 2006[1960])—and the transcript of his opening lecture for the seminar year 1965-'66, which re-appeared as 'Science and Truth' (Lacan, 2006[1965]). See, in this respect, the indispensable compendium by de Frutos Salvador (1994).

Finally, over and above the physical binding of the book and the mortar of the binding texts keeping the twenty-seven building blocks together, Lacan insisted on securing the entire edifice with a single headstone, ‘The Seminar on “The Purloined Letter”’ (Lacan, 2006[1957]a), taken out of the strict chronology, and itself extensively re-written and interspersed with two ‘binding texts’ (the ‘Presentation of the Suite’ and the ‘Parenthesis of Parentheses’).¹² As Derrida put it so perceptively in May 1990: Lacan’s seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter’, “by coming at the beginning, is thereby given the ‘privilege’ [Lacan’s term] of figuring the synchronic configuration of the set and thus *binding* the whole together” (Derrida, 1998[1996]: 49).¹³ Using a different metaphor, one might say that Lacan’s seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter’ is the one ring to rule them all, the one ring to find them, the one ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them . . . Considering all of this, I thus forcefully disagree with the editors of *Reading Lacan’s Écrits*, when they suggest that *Écrits* is not a book, and that what we are dealing with is but an alternative version of Magritte’s *La trahison des images*, which could be entitled *La trahison de l’écriture* (‘The Betrayal of Writing’) (Vanheule, Hook and Neill, 2019: xix) (Figure 2). *Écrits* is most definitely a book, and even—as Roudinesco (2014[2011]: 99) put it—a Book, in every possible sense of the word. Many readers may not encounter, or experience it this way, yet this does not preclude Lacan wishing it to be acknowledged as such.

12. Neither of these is included in the Table of Contents of *Écrits*.

13. The word ‘privilege’ appears in Lacan’s ‘overture’ to his *Écrits*, but is no longer detectable in the English translation. The French text reads: “Nous lui [le lecteur] ménageons un palier dans notre style, en donnant à *la Lettre volée* le privilège d’ouvrir leur suite [des écrits] en dépit de la diachronie de celle-ci [de la suite]” (Lacan, 1966a: 9).



Figure 2

However, as I pointed out earlier, the fact that *Écrits* is very much a book, the multiplicity inscribed in its name being nothing more, nothing less than a sagacious decoy for what is essentially designed as a single slab of considerable theoretical weight, should not be taken to imply that the book, merely by virtue of the fact that it is what it is, i.e. a book, is also the ‘finished article’, a definitive text containing everything it is supposed to contain, or everything Lacan wanted it to contain. I could substantiate this point simply, even simplistically by highlighting the fact that the title does not say, or even insinuate *Écrits complets* (complete writings), and that by 1966 Lacan had written (and published) much more than what eventually came to rest under the cover of *Écrits*: a substantial series of clinical psychiatric papers (see, for example, Lacan, 1931; 1933*a*; 1933*b*), an extended encyclopaedia article on the family (Lacan, 1984[1938]), and various distinctly ‘Lacanian’ essays, including a logical reflection on the number 13 (Lacan, 2001[1945-‘46]), a tribute to Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Lacan, 1982-‘83[1961]), and an homage to Marguerite Duras (Lacan, 1987[1965]). Were there to be only *one* edition of *Écrits*, one could easily argue that these writings were not selected for inclusion, because for one reason or the other Lacan had not considered them to be sufficiently suitable, perhaps disturbing the ‘order’, or even putting the

collection at risk of falling apart, not standing up, not hanging together. Yet, in all likelihood, at least some of these writings were not included, because Lacan forgot about them, or did not find the time to revisit them and allocate them to their proper place in his book. I can say this, because in actual fact there are *two* versions of *Écrits*, one ever so slightly bigger than the other, although the first version is rarely if ever mentioned. The version everyone refers to as *Écrits* is the second edition of the book, which Lacan had the opportunity to revise when the first edition became an instant blockbuster and was sold out at short notice. Those, like most of us, who did not manage to lay their hands on this first edition would not have known that the second edition was different, because nowhere on the cover or the endpapers did the publisher indicate whether the book was the first or the second edition, or that the second (and most widespread) edition differed from the first, original edition. However, a simple comparison of the Table of Contents of the first and the second editions suffices to ascertain that the first edition included only one appendix (Jean Hyppolite's commentary on Freud's *Verneinung*) and only one commentary by Miller, i.e. his 'Classified Index of Major Concepts'. For the second edition, a second appendix was added—a short paper by Lacan entitled 'Metaphor of the Subject' (Lacan, 2006[1961])—whereas another commentary by Miller, on Lacan's graphical representations, was included between the first commentary and the index of Freud's German terms.

To many, these observations may just be a matter of largely irrelevant historical minutiae, yet to me they demonstrate that, when Lacan submitted his original manuscript of *Écrits* to François Wahl—his former analysand, and his assigned editor at *du Seuil*, who may deservedly be dubbed the 'obstinate obstetrician' of *Écrits*—he did not regard the collection as complete or definitive.¹⁴ Were this to have been the case, he would not have added 'Metaphor of the Subject' when the opportunity arose for a second edition to be produced. Furthermore, the fact that, in this second edition, 'Metaphor of the Subject' was included as an appendix rather than within the chronological sequence—between 'Subversion of the Subject' and 'Position of the Unconscious'—should

14. François Wahl was in analysis with Lacan from 1954 until 1960, and also attended Lacan's seminars during this period and for some time afterwards. Interviewed by François Dosse about his involvement in the production of *Écrits*, he said: "The *Écrits* were published because of me, to tell you the truth. I found myself de facto in a central role, speaking purely in a topographical sense" (Dosse, 1997[1991]: 317). For a detailed discussion of his involvement in the production of *Écrits*, see Roudinesco (1997[1993]: 319-331).

probably not be seen as this text being of lesser importance than the others, but as a purely pragmatic decision by the publishers, taken in order to avoid the entire volume having to be re-set and re-paginated. *Écrits* is very much a book, then, but it is also an incomplete book, a book with a clearly identifiable and carefully identified beginning, but without a precise end, a book which could have been even longer and weightier than it already is, a book whose ending endlessly recedes into the distance, and which has only arrived at its destination in a certain form and size on pure practical grounds, much like the psychoanalytic process itself.

In the sense that quite a few essays could have been added to it had Lacan been given the opportunity to do so, *Écrits* remains very much an open book, at least at one end, yet it is also open-ended in the sense that it was only a summa of Lacan's intellectual journey up to 1966, a momentary written punctuation in an intermittently circuitous trajectory that had started over thirty years earlier and which would continue for another fifteen years, although without anyone evidently being able to predict this at the time. During these fifteen years that followed, Lacan did not shy away from regularly self-referencing his *Écrits*, or from weaving his own story through and around *Écrits*, despite or perhaps by virtue of his clever re-fashioning of the French 'publication' into 'pouvellication'. One could easily interpret this play on words as representative of Lacan's own ambivalence towards his published writings, or even as indicative of his distancing himself, in a crafty linguistic act of self-rejection, from his own main publication. Be that as it may, I shall venture exactly the opposite claim, notably that the pun condenses within itself a psychoanalytic theory of writing and (knowledge) transmission *qua* remainder, waste-product, remnant and residue, which was conceived at a time when Lacan would have been greatly preoccupied with assembling and revising his writings for inclusion in *Écrits*, whose birth was effectively facilitated by *Écrits*, and which would come of age in the aftermath of *Écrits*. In other words, *pace* its title, *Écrits* did not contain or synthesize a psychoanalytic theory of writing Lacan had developed over the years, but this very title re-focused Lacan's attention, and inaugurated extensive reflections on the status of the letter, which in this case represents a writing character and written text rather than a missive. In terms of its contents, *Écrits* thus constituted an integrated series of key milestones in the psychoanalytic itinerary Lacan had pursued over a period of thirty years. In terms of its title, however, the book opened a completely new horizon, stretching from the signifier to the letter, from linguistics to

topology and knot theory, from speech to writing, from oral transmission to mathematical formalisation, and from logocentrism to grammatology.

Lacan first presented this conception of writing and the letter as an irreducible excess at his seminar session of 15 December 1965, when he was undoubtedly already deeply engaged in preparing the manuscript for *Écrits*: “Writing and publishing is really not the same thing . . . The fortuitous and unexpected conjunction of what is called written text [*l’écrit*], and which has a very close relationship with the object *a*, provides every conjunction of writings [*écrits*] with the characteristic of the dustbin [*poubelle*]” (Lacan, 1965-’66, session of 15 December 1966). Yet as it happens, this alignment between writing and the object of desire (*a*) had already been envisaged in two of the texts that would be included in *Écrits*—once explicitly in ‘Kant with Sade’ (Lacan, 2006[1962]) and once implicitly in ‘The Seminar on “The Purloined Letter”’ (Lacan, 2006[1957]*a*)—although Lacan himself would not fully realise its contours in the latter text until 1966, and thus retroactively, ‘with hindsight’, in a flash insight of ‘deferred action’, as an ‘already there’ that was not properly appreciated when it revealed itself for the first time in the present.

Lacan’s theory of writing and (knowledge) transmission directly revolved, here, around the conceptualisation of the letter as a figuration of the object *a*, the elusive object-cause of desire (Lacan 2014[2004]: 101), which is simultaneously the object of anxiety and the object of (surplus) *jouissance*, and which Lacan himself at one point designated as his only real contribution to psychoanalysis (Lacan, 1973-’74: session of 9 April 1974). Cutting a long and complicated story short, I shall restrict myself to a succinct recapitulation of some of the passages in Lacan’s work in which this theory of writing as object of desire takes shape, which should suffice for me to open, by way of conclusion, a certain perspective on the transmission of (Lacanian) psychoanalysis, to which *Écrits*, as everyone is likely to accept, has massively contributed—not only during the years before the publication of Lacan’s seminars, i.e. before 1973, when the first of Lacan’s seminars was officially released in French (Lacan, 1973), but also afterwards, as a versatile theoretical training tool, a seemingly inexhaustible source of arcane wisdom and, on occasion, as a blunt instrument of intellectual torture.

At the start of his seminar session of 9 January 1973, after having admitted that, back in 1966, he could not think of anything better than to call his book *Écrits*, Lacan disclosed that he was well aware of the

fact that these *Écrits* were widely regarded as not being an easy read, to which he added that this is exactly what he himself had thought, to the point where he had even considered the possibility that they were “not meant to be read” (Lacan, 1998[1975]: 26). The French expression, here, is *pas à lire*, which could also be translated as ‘not to be read’, ‘not for reading’, or even as ‘unreadable’, ‘illegible’ and ‘unintelligible’. Lacan’s little quip unquestionably resonates with the experience of many a first, uninformed reader, yet even the seasoned reader may recognise some truth in this declaration, if only because some of Lacan’s prose is so cryptic and hermetic that whatever ‘reading strategy’ is being adopted, the lock remains firmly in place. Nevertheless, *pas à lire* should not be taken to imply that Lacan did not *want* his book to be read, that he did not care whether it found a readership, or that he was totally indifferent about the way it would be read. Six weeks after having said that his *Écrits* were *pas à lire*, Lacan complimented, without irony, the authors of *Le titre de la lettre* (Lacoue-Labarthe & Nancy, 1990[1973]; Nancy & Lacoue-Labarthe, 1992[1990]), although without mentioning their names.¹⁵ “[I]f it is a question of reading,” he proclaimed, “I have never been so well read—with so much love” (Lacan, 1998[1975]: 65). On the back cover of *Écrits*, Lacan opened his précis with a direct imperative, which was as much an exhortation to the reader as it was a precondition for the book’s message to arrive at its destination: “*Il faut avoir lu ce recueil, et dans son long*” (“One must read this collection cover to cover”, see above). Lacan also expressed his desire for the *Écrits* to be read in various talks and interviews he accorded following the book’s publication. In April 1967, he said to his audience in Bordeaux: “Even if you do not understand it very well, reading what I have written has an effect, holds your interest, is of interest. It is not that often that you read an *écrit* that is necessarily something urgent [*nécessité par quelque chose qui urge*], and which is addressed to people who really have something to do, something it is not easy to do” (Lacan, 2008[2005]: 62).¹⁶ Quizzed by Italian journalists as to the obscurity of *Écrits* in 1974, Lacan reiterated:

15. The English translation follows the second edition of the book, which was published in 1990, yet for some reason the order in which the authors appear on the cover and the endpages has been inverted in it.

16. Lacan went on to claim that his *Écrits* are of course unreadable (*illisibles*) to all those who do not have anything important to do, or who are themselves in a hurry, as a result of which they only ‘pretend’ to (have) read them. He also pointed out that the book had not attracted many reviews, which was blatantly untrue since at least fifteen had been published in special newspaper sections and a range of learned journals by that time. For a large selection of the most important of these, see Arnoux, Berrebi, Boudet & Germond (2016).

“I did not write them in order for people to understand them, I wrote them in order for people to read them. Which is not even remotely the same thing . . . What I have noticed, however, is that, even if people don’t understand my *Écrits*, the latter do something to people. I have often observed this. People don’t understand anything, that is perfectly true, for a while, but the writings do something to them” (Lacan, 2013[2005]: 69-70).¹⁷ Lacan’s desire for *Écrits* to be read can also be gauged from some of the handwritten dedications on the complimentary copies he sent out to colleagues and friends. The inscription on the copy he sent to Jean Beaufret, the French philosopher who facilitated Heidegger’s reception in France, reads: “*Puis-je espérer un autre lecteur que vous?*” (May I hope for a reader other than you?) (Lacan, 1966b). And on Maud and Octave Mannoni’s copy, he wrote: “*Avec ça la discussion peut dépasser le verbe n’est-ce pas et même le cuir chevelu*” (With this, the discussion may exceed the spoken word, don’t you think, and even the scalp) (Lacan, 1966c) (Figures 3 and 4).¹⁸

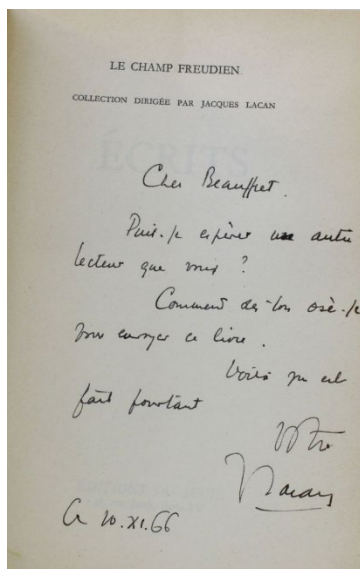


Figure 3

17. An Italian translation of *Écrits* by Giacomo B. Contri had been published shortly before this press conference. See Lacan (1974[1966]).

18. Octave Mannoni’s full first name was Dominique-Octave, and he only used Octave as his author’s name.

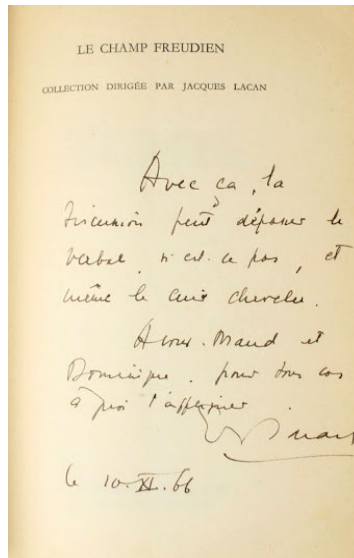


Figure 4

Lacan's desire for people to read what he had written may even be inferred from how he had dealt with some of the individual papers included in *Écrits*. For example, in the opening lesson of *Seminar V, Formations of the Unconscious*, Lacan relayed the hope that his audience had read his recently published essay 'The Instance of the Letter': "[M]y hope . . . is that you who make the effort to listen to what I have to say also make the effort to read what I write, since in the end it's for you that I write it" (Lacan, 2017[1998]: 3). As Jacques-Alain Miller put it, in his own back cover précis for the centenary collection of Lacan's *Autres Écrits: pas à lire* "is like 'Dangerous Dog', 'No Entry', or even 'Lasciate ogni speranza'. It's a challenge, made for tempting desire" (Miller, 2001). *Pas à lire* does not signal, then, yet another way of saying that what was included in *Écrits* should be instantly relegated to the dustbin (*poubelle*), at least not before it had been dutifully read. A book entitled 'Not to be read' or 'Unreadable' is more likely to be read than a book entitled 'Read me!', for the simple reason that the prohibition awakens the reader's desire to do exactly the opposite (Figure 5).



Figure 5

Here we encounter a first connection between writing and desire, prompted by Lacan's brief remark in January 1973, six-and-a-half years after the publication of *Écrits*. Yet the connection already appears inside *Écrits*, although it must be said that it is far from self-evident or clear-cut. Indeed, for a massive book entitled *Écrits*, it is distinctly odd that writing hardly receives any detailed attention in it, the more so as Lacan himself spent much of his early years as a psychiatrist studying and conceptualising the function and characteristics of (psychotic) writing (Lévy-Valensi, Migault & Lacan, 1931; 1975[1931]), devoting some of his own clinical writings to the significance of psychotic writing(-style) (Lacan, 1975[1933]), and organising his own doctoral dissertation around a clinical case he accessed and opened up through the patient's writings (Lacan, 1975[1932]).¹⁹ Of course, *Écrits* consistently deals with writings (in the plural), those of Freud more than anyone else's, yet also those of Edgar Allan Poe, Henri Ey, Ernest Jones, André Gide, Immanuel Kant, D.A.F. de Sade and innumerable others. Nonetheless, over and above Lacan's meticulous unpacking of their style and contents, the place, function and status of these writings, and of writing in general, is hardly a matter of theoretical and clinical concern in it. As

19. Speaking at Yale University in 1975, Lacan divulged that he had given pride of place to the case of 'Aimée' in his doctoral dissertation, because "the person in question had produced numerous... writings [*écrits*]" (Lacan, 1976: 9).

I indicated above, it is only in the aftermath of the publication of *Écrits*, and to a large extent by virtue of *Écrits*, i.e. of Lacan's designation of his book as *Écrits*, that the question of writing would become, or perhaps I should say re-become, a central focus of attention.²⁰

The connection between writing and (the object of) desire appears first of all in Lacan's "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'", with the caveat that it is quite unlikely for any reader to have identified it without Lacan himself having shown the way, and even to have done so in the presence of his directives, which appear in a couple of quite enigmatic, yet exceedingly precious paragraphs at the end of his overture to *Écrits*. Lacan wrote: "It is here [in the essay on 'The Purloined Letter'] that my students would be right to recognize the 'already' [*le "déjà"*] . . . For I decipher here in Poe's fiction . . . the division in which the subject is verified in the fact that an object traverses him without them interpenetrating in any respect, this division being at the crux of what emerges at the end of this collection that goes by the name of object *a* (to be read: little *a*). It is the object that (cor)responds to the question about style [Lacan's writing style] that I am raising right at the outset" (Lacan, 2006[1966]b: 4-5). Translated into an idiom that ordinary mortals can understand, Lacan is essentially stating here that in all those cases when people had been eager to demonstrate how Lacan's entire theory had already been contained *in nuce* in his earlier writings, there was but one instance where this effort would not have been foolhardy, namely in the consideration of his "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'" as a text that already deals with the object *a*.

20. I do not doubt that Lacan's reconsideration of writing during the late 1960s and '70s was also sparked by Derrida's trenchant critique of the logocentric tradition in Western philosophy, which moreover constituted the backdrop against which Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe pursued their reading of Lacan in *Le titre de la lettre*. In addition, I should point out that there are of course numerous passages in *Écrits*, including an entire essay, in which Lacan addresses the status of the letter, yet with very few exceptions these passages present the letter as an avatar of the signifier, and thus not as an instance or an agency that needs to be differentiated from the signifying chain. I first formulated this argument more than fifteen years ago (Nobus, 2002: 26-27), based on such assertions as "the letter exists as a means of power only through the final summons of the pure signifier" (Lacan, 2006[1957]a: 23) and the letter is "the material medium [*support*] that concrete discourse borrows from language" (Lacan, 2006[1957]c: 413). Since then, Tom Eyers (2012: 50-54) has taken issue with my claim that until the mid-1960s Lacan situated both the signifier and the letter firmly within the register of the Symbolic by arguing that the letter was always already a pre-figuration of the Real, yet he can only do so by re-interpreting the 'early Lacan' from the vantage point of the 'late Lacan', which is to some extent what Lacan himself did, although with the greatest caution, in the overture to his *Écrits*. For a brief critical discussion of Lacan's often tacit critique of Derrida's emphasis on the primordially of writing, see Nobus (2001). For an extensive critical analysis of the Lacan-Derrida debates, although without great emphasis on Derrida's systematic deconstruction of Lacan's reading of 'The Purloined Letter' in 'Le facteur de la vérité' (Derrida, 1987[1975]), see Hurst (2008).

Where is the object *a* to be found, then, in Lacan's "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'"? Lacan does not tell us explicitly, yet after having contemplated the question persistently for the past thirty years, I have come to the conclusion that is neither in the circuit of the letter—its journey from one location to another, from the Queen's boudoir to the Minister's apartment to Dupin's little back library—nor in its material support, i.e. in the missive itself. Allusive and oblique as many of his statements may be, Lacan left no doubt that he regarded the letter (the missive) as "a pure signifier" (Lacan, 2006[1957]*a*: 23), and its circuit as a simile for how the signifying chain organizes and determines subjectivity. If the object *a* is to be found anywhere in 'The Purloined Letter', and in Lacan's reading of it, it is precisely in the remainder that is left behind once the letter *qua* signifier has moved to another place. For nowhere in Poe's story does the letter travel from one place to another without its former existence in each place being marked by a substitute object, which constitutes the detritus of the letter's transition to another location. When the Minister steals the Queen's incriminating letter, he leaves an unimportant 'replacement letter' of his own on the table (Poe, 1988[1844]: 321). When Dupin cunningly succeeds in purloining the letter from the Minister's apartment, he leaves behind a similar missive in the card-rack above the fireplace (Poe, 1988[1844]: 332). And even at the moment when Dupin hands over the letter to the Police Prefect, it is only on condition that the latter leaves behind another piece of paper, a cheque containing his hefty reward (Poe, 1988[1844]: 325). What distinguishes these remainders from the actual letter, is that the reader knows that something is written on it—some insignificant scribbles in the Minister's hand, some verses from Crébillon in Dupin's hand, the amount of money as a recompense for Dupin's services in the Police Prefect's hand. Furthermore, these remainders do not enter their own symbolic circuit, insofar as they do not travel from one place to another, thereby affecting those who are in possession of it, but firmly stay in those places where they first appeared, as remainders and reminders of what was there before, and has now moved on.

Odd as it may seem, I believe that it is in these three written leftovers that Lacan recognized the object *a*—although after the fact, through a process of deferred action, when writing the overture to *Écrits* in 1966—as something that falls out of, and cannot be recuperated within the signifying chain. It is a trifle odd, because one may reasonably expect the incriminating letter to operate as the true object of desire and not its replacements, yet apart from the fact that this letter

remains empty (its message is never disclosed) and continues to circulate, this letter-object is much more a symbolic, structuring force than an object of desire. By contrast, the three left-overs are material pieces of writing that trigger and sustain the desire of whomever comes across them—the Queen's desire to retrieve a lost possession, the Minister's desire for revenge, and Dupin's desire for proper compensation. The three distinct replacement letter-objects, each written in different hands, are intrinsically worthless—the Queen is entirely “free to crumple up” the Minister's own letter, Lacan wrote (Lacan, 2006[1957]a: 8); the Minister's fit of anger after he has discovered Dupin's taunting verses may prompt him to do the same; the bank teller will undoubtedly destroy Dupin's cheque once it has been cashed—yet for all their *Ersatz* value, which is far less compared to the value of the letter they have replaced, they bolster and maintain the desire of their recipients. In short, as material written waste-products of the circulation of the signifier, they do not satisfy, but cause desire.

The only other place in *Écrits* where Lacan identified, this time explicitly, writing with the object of desire occurs in ‘Kant with Sade’ (Lacan, 2006[1962]). Investigating how the Sadean fantasy (Lacan, 2006[1962]: 653)—the fantasy of absolute destruction and transcendental negation with which Sade endowed his fictional band of libertines in the space of his creative imagination and in thousands of pages of (published and unpublished) writings—might be applied to Sade's own outlook on life as a writer, Lacan generated a new schema. Some scholars have recognised it as the ‘schema of masochism’ (Fink, 2014: 123-127), but in a flash of probably not-so-brilliant insight I have preferred to call it the ‘schema of Sade's practical reason’ (Nobus, 2017: 74), by way of tribute to Kant and to avoid Sade's singular *Weltanschauung* being readily pathologised (Lacan, 2006[1962]: 657) (Figure 6).

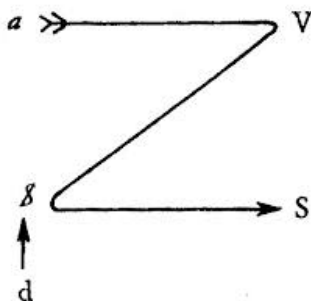


Figure 6

The exact relationship between Lacan's first schema (of the Sadean fantasy) and this second schema, and the associated re-distribution of the terms, should not concern us here. What matters is that what Lacan allocated to the place (and the function) of the object cause of desire (*a*) in the schema of Sade's practical reason is nothing more, nothing less than Sade's libertine writings (Lacan, 2006[1962]: 657), which landed him in a psychiatric institution with the diagnosis of 'libertine dementia' for the last ten-and-a-half years of his life, despite the fact that they had only been circulating in clandestine editions, had been prohibited from public access, and were widely regarded as unreadable—*pas à lire*, both in the sense of 'not to be accessed' and 'illegible'.²¹ As such, 'with Sade' Lacan had already reached the conclusion that (the act of) writing functioned outside the symbolic chain, and therefore outside the framework of meaning, as an object that is both gratifying and dissatisfying, and which can indeed be thrown or wiped away, before or after its potential benefits have been reaped, owing to its physical, material inscription.

What appeared, here, in a small corner of one of the most inaccessible essays in a volume that is not exactly known for its general accessibility, is that writing, its style and technique rather than its contents, functions as object *a*, causes rather than quells desire, if not in the author most definitely in its readership, because it forces them to examine the way in which they are implicated in what they have chosen to read, in what they have decided to pursue by way of reading, or *mutatis mutandis*, in what they have ignored or discarded as falling outside their scope of interest, or as being unworthy of further attention. Anticipating his response to the Italian journalists in 1974, Lacan argued in 'Kant with Sade' that Sade's allegedly unreadable libertine novels not only urged readers to re-examine their relationships with other people, as Simone de Beauvoir had claimed previously (de Beauvoir, 1990[1950-'51]: 64), but much more fundamentally that they compelled readers to investigate the relationships they entertain with themselves. As Lacan put it: "[A] fantasy [Sade's libertine writings], whose only reality is as discourse [as written text] and which expects nothing of your powers [in a physical sense], asking you, rather, to

21. Unfortunately, this connection between the object *a* and Sade's libertine writings in the schema of his practical reason is no longer evident from the English translation of *Écrits*, because the notation *a* has disappeared from the text, presumably because it was considered an index for the start of an enumeration which was not continued and therefore superfluous. In the first English translation of 'Kant with Sade', by J. B. Swenson Jr., it has been preserved in its rightful place (Lacan, 1989[1962]: 66).

square accounts with your own desires” (Lacan, 2006[1962]: 658). Much like Sade’s libertine novels, Lacan told the Italian journalists in 1974 that his *Écrits* may have been unreadable, but that insofar as they operate in the place of object *a* they also force its readers to come to terms with their desire (Figure 7).

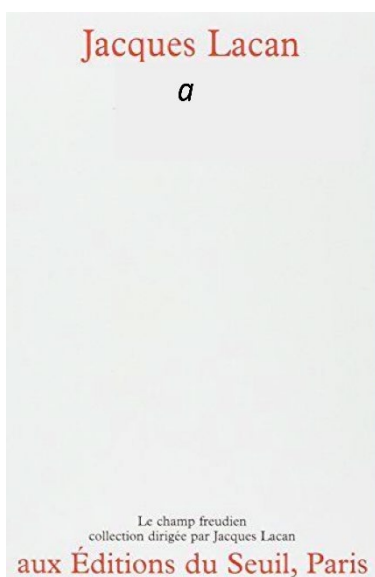


Figure 7

In conclusion, I would like to say a few words about how Lacan’s theory of writing as object of desire also informed his reflections on the transmission of psychoanalysis post *Écrits*, during the last fifteen years of his career. Basically, during those years Lacan became increasingly concerned about the transmission of his own work, which in this case cannot be dissociated from the question of psychoanalytic training. Troubled by what he perceived to be the ongoing proliferation and recurrent bestowal of spurious emblems of achievement in a formalistic system of psychoanalytic transmission, Lacan was at great pains to invent an alternative regulatory framework, in which trainees would not be given access to the profession on the basis of having demonstrated their understanding of psychoanalytic theory and technique in a series of essays and case-presentations or—God forbid—after having been ‘recognised’ as suitable practitioners by a professional body. In this precise context, we need to situate his hugely controversial proposal of

the pass (Lacan, 1995[1967]), which was formulated less than a year after the publication of *Écrits*, as an attempt to replace the monologicistic, unified voice of the master who gives his blessing to the newly initiated, with a proto-Bakhtinian carnival of interpenetrating utterances (a formal heteroglossia), but also (strange as this may seem) as an endeavour to capture the transmission of the object *a*, from its place as product-loss in the discourse of the master to its place as semblance-agency in the discourse of the analyst (Lacan, 2007[1991]). In this precise context, we also need to ascertain Lacan's progressive departure from speech and language, as the preferred vehicles for the transmission of knowledge, towards the mathematical and topological horizons of a new type of formalisation, in which writing and the written would be placed centre stage. Whether he succeeded in this 'grammatocentric' project is a different matter, and Lacan himself seems to have become increasingly despondent about the value of his new approach. During his customary closing address of the annual conference of the *École freudienne de Paris* in July 1978, which notably focused on the issue of transmission, he confessed: "As I think about it now, psychoanalysis cannot be transmitted . . . [E]ach psychoanalyst is forced . . . to reinvent psychoanalysis . . . I have nonetheless tried to give a bit more substance to this; and this is why I have invented a certain number of writings [*c'est pour ça que j'ai inventé un certain nombre d'écritures*]" (Lacan, 1979: 219). With hindsight, one might also say that this is why he had published a certain number of *Écrits*, in fact no more than one.

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