

The Malaise of Distant Bodies and the Insistence of the Letter

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“Something that one understands nothing about, is full of hope.”

Jacques Lacan¹

A Discontented Subject

As in Rilke’s poem, grieving the moment just lost and foreseeing a long winter, the globe entered quarantine: “whoever has no house by now will not build. Whoever is alone now will remain alone, will wait up, read, write long letters.”²

Writing: I could not do, not at the beginning. Anguished by the death counts and the threat of contagion with its consequent, obnoxious hygiene protocols, upset by the consolidated regime of the screen and by the insistence of the letter, I was in silence, a silence full of words. A louder silence even when, maniacally rushing into community initiatives, I sought a phantasmatic form of vaccination against COVID-19.

Ignited by the traumatic nature of this event, we all contracted the contagious fever to communicate and say All about the pandemic. Overwhelmingly symbolic and imaginary proliferations, artistic and cultural production, aim to signify this unhinged event in the making. We have gathered too many words by now, but too many of those little viruses are still out there. Our shields, made of potent words, want to conquer this viral invasion, to tame it—“calm down, beast, you won’t kill me.”

With speech, I am okay, my voice remains unsure, maintaining composure in its erratic journey, resolutely stretching with the fantasy of “I can say it All,” even if “I” do not know what “I” say. Speech plays around: “come and get me, damned thing, and get it over with.” Aware of

its impermanence *when not heard*, speech keeps its blah blah blah, smoothing signifiers, here and there, representing the subject and the world, business as usual.

The letter, instead, has gotten mad, ubiquitously committed to its ancient vocation to inscribe, to grasp, to give testimony of its destiny. Emerging graciously or painfully from the soft keyboard, contorting in written ink, a stroke or a musical note, the letter dances with sharp nailed shoes, leaving marks. A vehement harbinger from the Real, the letter traverses us and demands to be seen and to be written. From the meme to the novel, from the tweet to articulated critical thought, from moving and still images to eloquent movement, the letter brings to the fore what has been hidden, only to keep obscuring it again.

The Letter Writes the Subject, If, Only If

But what is the letter? Is it A, B, C, perhaps a Kanji? Yes, but something else; it could be letter-image, or letter-parapraxis, or letter-discourse. Jacques Lacan designates the letter as the “material support” of social discourse³ and it is different from the signifier because the letter has no access to meaning, it mainly stands there in its hollowness, waiting to be rescued by a subject who will take agency of it.⁴ The signifier, instead, does have meaning in that it represents the subject for another signifier within a signifying chain.

Although partaking of the Symbolic and Imaginary, the letter is located in the Real and it is nothing other than the very littoral, indicating the distinction of two fields. Lacan thought of the letter through the topology of the littoral when, travelling back from Japan in an airplane, he could see the demarcation on the Siberian plains, the shoreline of the ocean against the land.⁵ In this dynamic landscape the letter is a mere indication of non-reciprocal and heterogeneous domains, straddling between the coastline of truth and knowledge, and the sea of *jouissance*.

On one side of this landscape, a foundational, symbolic stroke linguistically structures our *jouissance* in all its meaninglessness. The letter here, emerging as littoral, makes a *bord* on the ocean of *jouissance*, edging the hole of knowledge. In this domain, the letter signals and animates the subject to enter a trajectory of branded corporal routes, marked by the word of the Other, to increase and release psychical tensions.

On the other side, there is a seashore of *knowledge* and of incomplete *truth*. The letter presents, here, its meagre ability to inscribe *jouissance*, yet it marks a symbolic limit. On this side of the littoral, the letter breaks down semblance, the term Lacan uses to designate what sustains discursive identifications, and when that occurs, a bit of knowledge of the subject's being becomes legible, partially inscribed. Somewhere else, I render the process of inscription as a partial symbolic assimilation, or legibility, of that which *does not stop not being written* (the impossible), and the process of re-inscription, as a new way of writing that which *does not stop being written* (the necessary)⁶ Both procedures halt compulsive repetition and they occur when a contingency of speech or act emerges in discourse, affording the possibility to (re)signify a value of truth. In the process of inscription, residues of the impossible Real -the Lacanian sexual non-relation- *stop not being written* as an effect of having written down the letter. In the process of reinscription, the necessary -the phallus in Lacanian lingo- *stops being written* by permitting a different writing.

Apart from the poetic topology of the littoral, Lacan provides another to describe the letter. The clouds seen from the airplane are pregnant with signifiers that are themselves semblance. When in pluvial precipitation, the cloud-signifiers rupture—we are writing and the letters that rain down leave a furrowing (*ravinement*) in the Real. Lacan says that writing is “in the real the furrowing of the signified.”⁷

But we might need to reflect on what constitutes semblance. In Seminar XVIII, Lacan locates semblance where a saying gains its sense, on the side of the Imaginary and Symbolic, while the letter is on the side of the Real and Symbolic. Semblance, at its core, is the lie that sustains agency in the social.⁸

While the letter carries some of the Real of our fleshed, sexual being, it cannot say much about it, it is shorn of knowledge. The letter insists and reaches its destination *if and only if* it finds a subject who assumes agency for that letter and transforms it in signifier, by deciding on a meaning of an otherwise absent sense, accounting for something of a residual truth that needs to be written.

The letter insists on a *subject* through a myriad of *symptomatic dispositions*—acting out, unexplainable repetitions, etc., depending on the signifying system in which the letter originated within a tradition of enjoyment. In the *social*, the letter insists on a *discursive arrangement* that both perpetuates and perpetrates a social relation. Lacan still reminds us, “one may well touch the Real, but not the true.”⁹

An example of the letter-image appears, according to Renen Amir, in the famous Freudian case of the Wolfman. The letter-image is the V, which appears in three key instances of the clinical case of the Wolfman,¹⁰ a man affected by an ominous feeling around sex. One is the image of the open legs of his nanny Gruscha, cleaning the floor on her knees, simulating a letter V¹¹; another V presents again in a butterfly’s wings, which trigger ominous feelings at its sight; and finally, the V indicating 5 P.M., when his depressive symptoms usually linger.¹² The letter V carries a sense for the subject but does not have a meaning because it only marks “*that which was omitted from and by the signifier.*”¹³

Another example is the letter-parapraxis, which appears in a performative form through a bungled action. Clinical instances demonstrate how the so-called failed action—always successful for its eloquent saying—demonstrates a letter, which signals a sense for the subject involved in the parapraxis. Yet its signification, the meaning, has been omitted within the signifying chain. Some time ago, I missed four flights under peculiar circumstances. The syntagma used in Spanish, my mother tongue, is *perder el vuelo*, to lose a flight.¹⁴ I had to miss those flights to be able to see and inscribe a letter missing in my knowledge, the literality of *loss*, *perder*.

The letter-discourse is another example of the letter, which manifests in the repeated insistence of representations and productions within a specific group of subjects sharing a form of social bonding.

The Ambivalence of Erotic Bodies

Let's find some letters in the distant bodies forced on us by the pandemic. The body, as an entity among other bodies, broaches the historical question of sociality. Myth, ritual, art, religion, love, philosophy, and psychoanalysis, every branch of social and natural sciences, have been occupied with the question and none of these endeavours retain the last word on the truth of it.

The letter-discourse refers to the structure in which we establish social bonding, the relation between humans that connects us *through language* and *through enjoyment*. That is the case because the body, as a primordially imaginary construction, is enveloped by the symbolic order to account for the real organism, and is marked by a fixed way of enjoying—the letter coming from the Other of *jouissance*. Enjoyment, or *jouissance*, is a human production that embodies excessive psychological tension whose effects go from pleasure to anguish, to *jouissance* (morbid enjoyment), to surplus *jouissance* (an excess that produces a lack).

Letter-discourse is, thus, the structure in which we lodge our bodies in arrangements that repeat a form of social relationship. In Lacanian theory, those who are bonded share a number of discursive elements: a semblance (agent) affected by a cause, a Master signifier which leads meaning, a place of otherness that receives semblance, and a production that engenders a remainder surplus. Also, social bonding requires linguistic spaces that hold the values of a subject, truth, knowledge, and surplus enjoyment. The study of the Real structure in which we embody social exchanges—structuralism—is defined by Lacan as “simply seriousness” due to its concern with the material yet opaque effects of structure, claiming that psychoanalytic theory is intrinsically involved in elucidating the cause of discourse itself.¹⁵

The collective will to gather in society, the “*affectio societatis*,” as Jacques-Alain Miller explains, necessitates a Master signifier to consolidate a group, yet that is not enough;¹⁶ it is Eros, as drive, that brings into the picture *object petit a* in its supplementary and remainder quality. The signifiers that bond us might be clear, but the collective production of *object a* (surplus, loss) remains veiled, it is opaque. What sort of enjoyments, what semblance of *object a* is circulating in communities during the pandemic? I think of some letter-discourses insisting during this pandemic: extimacy, ominousness, ambivalence, and virtuality.

COVID-19 shows us the inevitable entwinement we have with others. Lacan called this *extimacy*, the topology of psychical connection of inside and outside—as in the Moebius strip or Klein bottle—between one human and others.¹⁷ We need to retreat from regular spaces and habitual practices in order to “flatten the curve” of contagion: to be able to take care of our self, we need to take care of others. This new order shows the intimate socio-spatial connection among human beings. But this condition of otherness is paradoxical and brings about a great discontent, agitated in two ways. On the one hand, isolation in quarantine requires the

estrangement of others for safety reasons, nullifying the haptic and rendering others ominous for their potential of contagion. On the other hand, physical contact, now limited to those with whom we share a life (those in our “bubble”), affects the usual discharges of psychical tension (libido and destrudo) and turns them exclusively towards one’s body and those of the familiar bubble or pod, which causes a major upset in the very regulation of jouissance, demanding renegotiation of the structural mechanisms of alienation and separation.

The current arrangements of representation and production during the social-distancing times of the pandemic render my fellow other as *ominous*. Sigmund Freud conceived the ominous as a complex phenomenon of diverse characteristics: something ominous is anguishing since it is intimately related to death, corpses, and the return of the dead.¹⁸ Something ominous also refers to the conscious awareness of an involuntary repetition; in this case, the autonomic development of an animated entity—the coronavirus—whose very multiplication obscures the line between fantasy and reality.¹⁹ The ominous, today, manifests in distancing from others: we cannot meet in person, cannot touch others that are not in our bubble because we risk contagion and death.

Community building, since Freud, is known to be an *ambivalent* task. We learn from him that human happiness is not included in the plan of “Creation” (LOL!!), and that there are three sources responsible for our suffering: our body with its anguish and pain; the external world and its destructive forces (aka COVID-19); and our relationship to others. The latter, Freud says, “is perhaps more painful to us than any other.”²⁰ To cope with these sources of unhappiness, Freud adds, we have: fantasies and drugs, isolation and inhibition, displacement and sublimation, religion and beauty, love, symptoms, and community building.

While discussing the Western, modern condition, Freud states that as much as we need it, we are always hostile to culture and community.²¹ Although we enjoy scientific and technological advances that protect us from nature, such as the chasing down of a vaccine to protect us from COVID-19, civilization opposes our needs and desires. Civilization brings about the trauma of alterity and difference, the realization of not being the exception to castration, the perforation of the narcissistic fantasy of being the only *One* of worth in this world; “me and my m(O)ther plus the remainder of our union, I can be all of that,” that’s the fantasy.

Leave me alone! Freud tells us that to fight the malaise caused by others “the readiest safeguard is voluntary isolation, keeping oneself aloof from other people,” from which we acquire the pleasure of quietness and peace.²² But this, we know from the experience of depression, simultaneously causes a sense of worthlessness and loneliness, which emerges from the lack of social recognition essential to count oneself as *one* thread in the social tissue.

During the pandemic, there is, for sure, a *virtual letter* of enjoyment. The pandemic has slightly shifted the Freudian *Unbehagen*, “discontent”; what can I do to count myself if I lack the vocation of an influencer? Pre-pandemic social relations were already heavily mediated by the digital gadget and the absence of the body of others, and with this sanitary emergency, our cyborg condition has been strengthened.²³ Those lucky enough to keep their jobs work increasingly more and more in front of screens, and we have lost embodied exchanges in small, personal groups, what Ian Angus renders as “The Loss of the Middle,” the reduced direct social relations that have left the individual between the intimate familial, on the one hand, and the virtual global, on the other.²⁴ Personal groups—classroom, workplace, group therapy, conferences—have by now moved to digital platforms to preserve social distancing. Is this only temporary?

The pandemic brings some ease to the way we regulate our social exchanges. Being more cyborgic in our social engagements allows us more free time as we do not commute from place to place. At home, our bodies are comfortable in lounge attire and more relaxed, and we can disappear more easily into screens. We can mute people if we do not want to hear them and enjoy this act of silent rebellion. We curate our feeds and only see people we want to see. We can connect with others from our geographical location and enjoy new meaningful connections around similar interests while, perhaps, retaining a *kinship of the flesh* as we seem to enjoy meeting familiar faces we have encountered in embodied exchanges.

Thus, the virtual gives us a way of curating alterity; we have the freedom to choose optimal distancing and proximity. Difference remains in my control and the absence of the obnoxious or sexy body of the other is quickly accepted and adapted to. Is this something that could become permanent? Would the erotogenic orifices of the body, with its drive—gaze, voice, smell, the haptic—be increasingly absorbed by the technological click, what Michel de Certeau calls the “cancerous growth of vision”?²⁵ I do not know.

People’s predisposition, or lack thereof, towards embodied exchanges presents uneven opportunities in these times of physical distance, as people are distinctively affected by the absence of the bodies of others. Some who thrive in collective embodiment might be more afflicted than those who find solace mainly in their own company and/or those who empower themselves more effectively in the virtual world. Although there are, always, non-human alternatives to human contact—nature, trees, ocean, birds, or pets—I hear people missing the fuel, flesh, vitality, and intensities of other bodies around them. I miss it too. From the perfunctory touch of someone softly removing the fluff caught on my garment’s shoulder; to eye-contact communication in a meeting; to someone’s noticeable breathing as they defend an

argument that we disagree on but will not kill us, not today; to shaking hands with the analysands who visit my office; to the gentle stroking on the back of a friend when parting ways for the day. I miss energizing with other bodies in dancing movement and, of course, the warm embrace of trust and friendship that reminds me that I am alive, alive and not dead. What sort of erotic sociopolitical body will replace the flesh if the shift to disembodying others remains?

How Do We Write?

Thus far, we need signifiers and *object a* to bond a body politic, and their building blocks are letters. Could we write some of them? What if we are blocked? We know the feeling of “everything has already been said and nothing is left to say.”

To be able to write, we must conjure up the letter that “dwells in whoever speaks.”²⁶ But the letter, like a hysteric seductress, demands to be known and seen while it simultaneously erases knowledge. “Chillen, putas” is what Octavio Paz demands of words, calling them whores and telling them to scream so that they swallow their own letters to make writing possible.²⁷ In the *act of writing*, one needs to trap the letter, as Paz would suggest, by the words’ own tails. One will need to extract the letter from the site of the Other, grab its debris and, with it, write a bit of being, renouncing, if ever temporarily, to hear the sense with which the Other marked one’s enjoyment.

Due to the sheer impotence of the signifier to speak about sex, death, and the Real, the letter repeats itself to see if a subject dares to trap it and, if so, the surrounded letter erases semblance, creates an inaugural sense. Thus, an act of writing is only possible when effacing the Master signifier that secures meaning. It is from rupturing semblance, erasing the marks left by the pelting down of significations, that *object a* can partially be recognized as lost; at which

point, the subject appears, conquering a parcel of space already colonized by the Other, the Other of jouissance.

This brings us to an important distinction between writing in alienation and in separation; as Eric Laurent clearly puts it, “it is necessary to distinguish the register of *alienation*—by means of which a subject inscribes himself in the Other, where the effects of sense are produced by the primary identification—from that of *separation*—where the place of jouissance is inscribed, marking the place of the lost object through the effects of sense.”²⁸ Daniel Gerber renders the act of writing akin to the analytic act as it involves overcoming the illusion of All; he cites Jorge Luis Borges’ *The Library of Babel*, which contains the total collection of all books, as the model of totalizing letters.²⁹ The act of writing confronts us with *Nothing* and with *All*, demanded by the Other. If All has been said, I have no letter to count for myself.

To surpass the paralyzing illusion of totality, we need to write letters that symbolically harness the imaginary flight of the Real flesh. To write, we need an object that is not so much my representation but a piece of my jouissance inscribed in act. Writing with a letter is a remainder of my flesh. Here is my blood, take it or leave it. It does not really matter. A piece of flesh that drops down—sweat, breath, tears, a reddish eruption on the skin—to print my proper name in the Other’s field, to then regain my body, leaking jouissance outside of the imaginary, to (re)inscribe (hi)stories.

Maybe it has never been otherwise.

¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XVIII: On a discourse that might not be a semblance (1970–71)*, trans. Cormac Gallagher, session 17.03.1971, <http://www.lacaninireland.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Book-18-On-a-discourse-that-might-not-be-a-semblance.pdf>.

² Rainer Maria Rilke, *Autumn Day*, trans. Robert Bly, (n.p., 1981), accessed 06.06.2020, <http://www.thebeckoning.com/poetry/rilke/rilke4.html#:~:text=Whoever%20is%20alone%20now%2C%20will,leaves%20fall%20and%20blow%20away>.

³ Jacques Lacan, “Instance of the letter in the unconscious or reason since Freud” (1957), *Écrits* (2006), 413.

⁴ Lacan, *Seminar XVIII*, session 12.05.1971.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Hilda Fernandez-Alvarez, “So, You Want a Master? Psychoanalytic considerations on the intellectual’s responsibility in light of traumatic repetition,” in *Spectres of Fascism*, ed. Samir Gandesha (London: Pluto Press, 2020), 142–163.

⁷ Lacan, *Seminar XVIII*, session 12.05.1971.

⁸ Lacan, *The Seminar Book XVIII*, 12.05.1971. I think of semblance as a consensual automatic etiquette, according to the dominant discourse, that gets activated when social bonding demands identifications; semblance commands every discourse—except the capitalist, where semblance or social link is not possible.

⁹ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XXII Joyce and the Sinthome, Part 1 (1975–76)*, trans. Cormac Gallagher, session 10.02.1976, <http://www.lacanireland.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Book-23-Joyce-and-the-Sinthome-Part-1.pdf>.

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, “From the history of an infantile neurosis (Wolfman)” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Vol. XVII*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1973), 3.

¹¹ Freud, “Wolfman,” 92.

¹² Ibid., 90–91.

¹³ Renen Amir, “The unreadable letter,” in *Psychoanalysis: Topological perspectives*, eds. M. Friedman and S. Tomšič (Bielefeld: Verlag, 2016), 213.

¹⁴ The “Stupidity of Losing” is an unpublished text about this experience.

¹⁵ Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XVI*, 13.11.1968.

¹⁶ Jacques-Alain Miller “Affectio Societatis,” accessed 06.06.2020, <http://www.amp-nls.org/page/gb/49/nls-messenger/0/2019-2020/4230>.

¹⁷ Jacques Lacan, *S7*, 139.

¹⁸ Sigmund Freud, “The uncanny,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol. XVII*, 241.

¹⁹ Freud, “The uncanny,” 244.

²⁰ Sigmund Freud, “Civilization and its discontent” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Vol. XXI*, 76.

²¹ Freud, “Civilization,” 87.

²² Ibid., 77.

²³ In “Will a cyborg steal my jouissance?” 94, I claimed that there is a co-production between the subject and mass-produced technological objects (laptop, cell phone, social networks), that nourishes the digital capital with our unconscious labour of enjoyment.

²⁴ Ian Angus, “Loss of the middle,” *Listening to COVID-19*, <http://www.lacansalon.com/listening-to-covid-19/loss-of-the-middle>.

²⁵ Michael de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. S Rendall (Berkeley: California University Press), xxi.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Octavio Paz, “Las palabras,” *Obra Poética I (1935–1970)* (México: FCE, 1996), 66.

²⁸ Eric Laurent, “The purloined letter and the TAO of the Psychoanalyst,” *The Later Lacan*, eds. Veronique Voruz and Bogdan Wolf (NY: Suny Press, 2012), 35.

²⁹ Daniel Gerber, “Del significante a la letra: Un destino de escritura” in *Escritura y Psicoanálisis*. (México: Siglo XXI), 30. My translation.