On Style: An Atelier
Eileen A. Joy, Anna Kłosowska

Published by Punctum Books


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/76456

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2652745
Ever since the Sokal affair, humanities scholarship in some quarters stands accused of unintelligibility, emptiness, or absurdity.¹ Sure, there’s some bad theoretical writing out there. But not all of it is willfully unreadable. A familiar set of

---

I would like to thank the St. Louis Lacan Study Group for their help with this essay.

¹ See The Sokal Hoax: The Sham That Shook the Academy, ed. Lingua Franca (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000).
binaries runs through and across these accusations: not only clarity/obscurity, but wonder/pessimism, aesthetics/politics, and affect/the hermeneutics of suspicion. But these oppositions are far from being rigidly distributed along either side of the fault line dividing the “two cultures.” The turn to what has been called “the new aestheticism” within literary studies, for example, involves a radical rethinking of beauty and affect, not just in the way we read literary texts—including medieval ones—but in the way we write about them.² A less familiar assumption made by the accusers is that the beautiful leads us to truth—what the philosopher Denis Dutton describes as “aesthetic insight”—whereas the unreadable is the sign of a certain exhaustion in the humanities: an endless self-referentiality, a “process of text in/text out.”³ Within such a


³See, for example, John Brockman, “Introduction: The
schema, research in the humanities merely recycles existing authorities and thus fails to produce new knowledge. Psychoanalysis, however, provides some fruitful ways of thinking about the relationship between obscurity and beauty, and why they matter in academic discourse. Moreover, the moment when the theoretical text presents itself as obscure, sightless, like the analyst who remains silent in analysis, allows desire to emerge in the subject, and thus allows for the production of something new.4


Écrits was “not meant to be read,” having already warned us that his writing is distinguished by “a prevalence of the text,” leaving the reader with “no other way out than the way in, which I prefer to be difficult.” The structure of this coercive style is a Möbius strip, where the outside continues the inside, so that the reader is forced to exit from this writing only by being forced to enter into it, to travel out of the unconscious only on the condition of entering into it. By presenting the analysts he is training with signifiers that are “difficult to read,” that are “read awry,” or that are unreadable, Lacan aims to provoke and engage their desire. Their demand—for intelligibility, for knowledge—“by being articulated in signifiers, leaves a metonymic remainder that runs under it, . . . an element necessarily lacking,

unsatisfied, impossible, misconstrued, . . . an element that is called desire.” Designed also to mime the talking cure, in which the patient produces a stream of signifiers to which the analyst must give a reading that is different from what they signify, the purposive int-illegibility of Lacan’s writing not only underlines the fact that it is our captation by signifiers that produces desire but also makes desire central to its field of inquiry.

One of Lacan’s signifiers that captures my attention is *poubellication*, his playful neologism for the “bringing out” of his difficult Écrits. As the translator Bruce Fink notes, this word “is a condensation of *poubelle*, garbage can (or dustbin), and *publication*, publication,” and it can “perhaps also be seen to contain *embellir*, to beautify, and other words as well”—“bellicose,” perhaps, which certainly figures the aggressive jouissance of the Écrits. To tarry with Lacan’s idiom for a moment, one English translation of the style of Écrits might be *litter-ature*, the letter as litter, writing as rubbish, just as one translation

---

11 The British English translation of poubelle is “wastepaper bin” or “dustbin.”
of poubellication might be rubblishing. But there is beauty in there too. I also hear in Lacan’s neologism the pun poo-belle, operating across English and French, a pun that points to the trope of writing as the transformation of shit into beauty: as Roland Barthes has it, “When written, shit does not smell.” By insisting on its status as garbage, Lacan’s difficult writing refuses to purge language of its dirt by an act of ablootification. If Dominique Laporte, in History of Shit, aims, in the words of one of his translators, “to reverse the deodorization of language by means of a reeking syntax,” then we might think of Lacan’s punningly irreverent and intermittently recalcitrant style as an attempt to reverse the intelligibility of Freudian discourse by means of a profusion of int-illegible signifiers: garbage spilling from the poubelle. And since garbage is a sign of the human, Lacan poses a question not only about our rejection of the difficult—are we rejecting part of ourselves?—but also about the beautiful that might be contained within it.

So is Lacan’s style beautiful? Rather than seeing the beautiful as the sublimation of desire, Lacan insists that beauty and desire are intimately related and densely contradictory.16 For Lacan, beauty is both the barrier to the realization of our desire and what points us towards it:

On the scale that separates us from the central field of desire, if the good constitutes the first stopping place, the beautiful forms the second and gets closer. It stops us, but it also points in the direction of the field of destruction.17

So in Lacanian terms, a beautiful style—a style that exhibits one of Freud’s three requirements of civilization, namely, cleanliness, order and beauty18—acts on the one hand as a disciplinary mechanism that holds our desire in check, like Beaute in Chaucer’s *Parliament of Fowls*, “withoutyn any atyr” (l. 225), one of the many figures that surrounds the temple of Venus and who mesmerizes the dreamer. But on the other hand, the function of the beautiful is to indicate our most radical jouissance. This is Yeats’s “terrible beauty” or Chaucer’s Venus, less an icon of beauty than a queasy reminder of the link

---

between beauty, aggressive destruction, and desire, as she lies on a golden bed in the flickering gloom of her tent surrounded by two suffering lovers, the broken bows of Diana, and images of famous, dead, unhappy lovers. Moreover, her beauty, glimpsed by a sudden burst of light, reveals to the dreamer “the site of his relationship to his own death,” and “reveal[s] it . . . only in a blinding flash”:19 in other words, our love of beauty is driven by the death wish. Our desire has no final resting place. The effect of beauty splits desire, on the one hand extinguishing or tempering it (as in Thomas Aquinas), but on the other hand, as in Kant, bringing about “the disruption of any object.”20 Fascinated, we fail to see anything in the object—in the style—except our delight in looking at it. It’s one of the effects that the eerily beautiful style of Aranye Fradenburg’s Sacrifice Your Love21 has on me: its difficult, artful prose succeeds in making both present and absent the beautiful object that we call the Middle Ages. We are a long way here from the beautiful as morality, as truth, as sublimation, as stylistic ornament or accidents, as consolation, or as the object of dispassionate contemplation.

Finally, in poubellication there is also la belle, the beautiful woman, the figure that the analyst must speak to at the moment of transference, when the “healthy part” of the subject “closes the

21 See footnote 2 above.
door, or the window, or the shutters [volets], or whatever,” concealing “the beauty [la belle] with whom one wishes to speak.” Lacan does not identify this “beauty” because he refuses to substantify the unconscious. Perhaps she is la belle au bois dormant (Sleeping Beauty), waiting to be awoken from apparent death, or la belle dame sans merci: the courtly lady, in her various “inhuman,” Thing-like, (w)hole-like, or good incarnations. In the language of sport, la belle is “the decider”: the game that will decide who goes forward to the next round or who wins. Perhaps a part of the patient is playing the deciding game, just as the analyst must decide on the right moment to begin her interpretation if the shutters are to be reopened. I cannot decide which meaning Lacan intends here. This belle, this beauty, this decider, is that part of the subject that is “magnetized,” charged to such an extent that she is split, dissociated from her desire. Beauty here is not what deflects desire or opens on to it but the mark of a radical dissociation of the subject from her desire as the unconscious

---

25 Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 134: “What there is beyond, what a little while ago I called the beauty behind the shutters, this is what is in question. . . . It is a question of mapping out how some-thing of the subject is, behind the screen, magnetized, magnetized to the profound degree of dissociation, of split.”
closes upon itself but nevertheless remains outside.\textsuperscript{26}

To think of as the \textit{belle} in the \textit{poubellation} of \textit{Écrits} as this \textit{belle} is to pull the question of difficult style into the discourse of the transference and hence of sexual reality. Lacan’s claim that the reader is “not obliged to understand my writings”\textsuperscript{27} of course directs our attention to the effects—\textit{and} affects—they are intended to produce (and there is no change without affect).\textsuperscript{28} The reader is positioned vis-à-vis Lacan’s text, with its intermittently impenetrable style, like the analyst before the analysand, awaiting the crucial moment of the transference when they must decide to speak to the shuttered beauty of the writing, to allow desire to emerge in the subject. And since the reality of the unconscious is sexual, the question of style is necessarily also one of sexuality.

In debates about abstruse style in the humanities one element at stake is the opposition between scientific discourse and the discourse of the Other, that is, the unconscious. I want to link this to the opposition that is sometimes drawn between invention in the sciences and self-referentiality in the humanities. Science, declares

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{26} Lacan, \textit{Four Fundamental Concepts}, 131.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Lacan, “The Function of the Written,” 34.
\item \textsuperscript{28} “Representation without affect is . . . sterile”: Bruce Fink, “Knowledge and Jouissance,” in \textit{Reading Seminar XX: Lacan’s Major Work on Love, Knowledge, and Feminine Sexuality}, eds. Suzanne Barnard and Bruce Fink (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002), 22 [21–46].
\end{itemize}
Jacques-Alain Miller, “sets out to establish with the unconscious a relation of non-relation. . . . Yet the unconscious does not disappear, and its effects continue to be felt.”

Desire has not been banished from scientific discourse, as Fradenburg argues about historicism within medieval studies or as the theoretical physicist Carlo Rovelli argues when he admits that “[t]he scientific quest for knowledge is deeply emotional in its ways and motivations.” But it is the movement of desire within particular styles of literary criticism that stops them from being merely self-referential, by allowing new things to emerge.

In the transference, the analyst must vacate the place of “the subject supposed to know” in order to demonstrate to the patient that she, the analyst, does not possess what the patient wants, does not have an answer to his demands, and cannot validate him as a subject. Faced with the analyst’s refusal to offer herself as an object to fill out his lack, the patient comes to recognize that the Other is also lacking, and that his desire is not completely bound up with the Other. Because the place of the object is now empty, there is room for the patient to move beyond the deadlock of identification with the analyst. For Lacan this separation is also the condition for what he calls “reading.” In other words, in so far as it enacts a

necessary break with transferential reading—where the text appears to offer itself as the fulfillment of the reader’s desire—the unreadable text can enable the production of new objects of research in the humanities. Once the supposedly masterful object (whether analyst or text) is desupposed of its knowledge and is no longer the object that fulfils desire but rather the objet petit a, the cause of desire, then desire can emerge in the subject/reader. Things can move on. The work of reading is never concluded.

As Parveen Adams argues about the powerful transferential effects on the viewer of Mary Kelly’s extraordinary artwork Interim: “The empty place of the object will come to be occupied by new things among which may be the work of art itself.”32 If a text refuses—through its stylistic obscurity—the role of the object of desire but rather becomes the cause of desire, this can be the basis for a model of work in the humanities that counters that of self-referentiality. In this model, unreadability is not the ingest-and-excrete model of “text in/text out,” nor the production of “slag,” but the production of a “fruitful remainder,”33 the remainder of desire: something that cannot be signified but that continues to provoke new meanings.

33 Lacan, Four Fundamental Concepts, 134: “In human destiny, the remainder is always fruitful. The slag is the extinguished remainder.”