

# Knots

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## Chapter 3

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### Lacan's Romanticism

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### 3 Lacan's Romanticism

*David Sigler*

“The only cure for Romanticism is to analyse it.”

—T.S. Eliot (27)

The title of this essay carries a double valence. It indicates, first, the aspects of Romantic literature that Jacques Lacan particularly valued and, second, that Romanticism was, from its own historical moment, already “Lacan’s.” By this latter point, I don’t especially mean that Romantic poetry anticipated Lacanian insights (although others, such as Ben Hewitt, have argued this recently) but rather that the Romantic period created “Lacan,” so to speak. His enigmatic persona, his guarded fascination with revolution, his fusion of scientific and poetic writing, his intellectual touchstones, such as Kant, Sade, and Hegel, his devotion to the unconscious, his devotedness to categorizing and classifying ways of being according to their investments in enjoyment—all of these are inheritances of Romanticism. Lacan felt that Romanticism had a special connection to psychoanalytic thought, even calling British Romanticism “the fertile ... period” in the prehistory of psychoanalytic writing (*Seminar V*, 92). In this essay, I want to account for that special connection, by discussing the innovative role of *jouissance* in Romantic-era literature. The culture of sexuality, motivated by desire and haunted by *jouissance*, that Lacan would devote his career to disentangling, was, I will argue, developed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, especially in literary texts, and Lacan understood this intuitively.

Over the past decade or so, it has become apparent to Romanticists that the Romantics “invented” psychoanalysis, through the “remarkable” “clinical features” of their texts (Faflak, 7, 5). The era, it would seem, also coined the modern notion of the unconscious and developed the paradoxical and enigmatic structures of sexuation that Lacan would diagram in his later seminars (Garofalo, “Gaze and Voice”; Sigler). We might then say that Romanticism created both the methodologies and objects of Lacanian inquiry. To put it baldly, an alternate universe in which there had been no Romanticism would be a universe without “Lacan”: he would either have entirely wrong about everything, because

sexuality and subjectivity would have been so differently constituted, or (more likely) he would have been devoting himself to other topics. He would not been “Lacan” in the sense that that name registers with us today. Hence, Lacan cherished British Romanticism, but British Romanticism invented Lacan, and the overdetermination of my essay’s title will imply, I hope, that these two aspects of “Lacan’s Romanticism” are tied together, though at first they may seem separate.

To show their interconnectedness, this essay will trace “Lacan’s Romanticism” across three registers: we have Lacan’s Romanticism at the level of the Imaginary, in which Lacan, discussing Romanticism in his Seminar and discovering himself in its innovations, says, in effect, “that’s me!” We have Lacan’s Romanticism at the level of the Symbolic, by which I mean how we have learned to track the rising discourse of sexual enjoyment within British Romanticism. It was a time of winnowing pleasures, in which heteronormative ideologies were congealing around an obligatory two-sex system (see Laqueur; Nagle), but that was concurrently developing a scientific language of sexuality and perversion (see George; Sha). Conservative commentators of the era saw it as an age of “national effeminacy” (*Woman*, 1.219–220). The meaning of sexual difference and the connotations of “woman” were both radically up for debate, as shown in the scholarly work of David Collings, Gary Kelly, and Daniela Garofalo (Garofalo, *Women*, 1–29) and as we can easily see in literary texts like *The Prelude*, *Frankenstein*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. One can see the effects of this cultural transformation everywhere within Romantic literature. The poet-novelist Charlotte Smith, for instance, cast herself in a variety of incompatible but culturally recognizable roles, asking to be recognized as “woman” within each of them, as Jacqueline Labbe has argued (3). As Labbe notes, Smith’s experiments in womanhood exploit the layered apparatus of the Lacanian Imaginary and Symbolic (Labbe, 10). This, I would add, was possible because subjectivity was beginning to be haunted by a new concept called the “unconscious”: there was an emergent sense that part of the subject was not merely unknown, but completely unknowable—there was an autonomous thing “within me” that “I” cannot “revive,” as Samuel Taylor Coleridge once put it (Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 21; Coleridge, 42). The Romantics, confronting the unconscious and theorizing desire as its consequence, saw the latter as the product of a drive that necessarily misses its aim as it attempts to recoup lost sexual enjoyment. We see a clear example of this in the Irish writer Anne Burke’s novel *The Sorrows of Edith* (1796), the story of a woman suffering under the burden of her desire and driven to suicide by an interminable melancholia: “I had, unconsciously, cherished the destructive passion; and when I discovered the real state of my heart, it was long ere I ventured to reveal it to the object of my adoration.” For Burke’s Edith, the state of one’s own heart can be the object of a painstaking

investigation, given how one's "cherished" pleasures are enjoyed only "unconsciously." There is a dread, in this passage, of being parasitized by one's own enjoyment: "a canker-worm preys upon my heart, and poisons all the enjoyments of life," Edith laments (Burke, 1.32). Which leads us to Lacan's Romanticism at the level of the Real: the impossible *jouissance* itself, which shouldn't be, but never fails, and thus "never stops not being written" within the literature of the period (Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 59). The autonomy of one's desire was understood to be a burden, particularly on women, in an era in which "Every indecent curiosity, or impure fancy, is a deflowering of the mind, and ... defilement of the body too: for between the state of pure unspotted virginity and prostitution, there are not many intermediate steps" (Kenrick, 29). Yet, as the stakes of desire were ratcheting up in the arena of female conduct, "eros became the emotional engine of a revolutionary-utopian programme" for feminist writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft (Taylor, 142).

Figuration is the tie that holds this Borromean knot together, across the three registers: it is the sinthome of Lacan's Romanticism, "a fourth term [that] has to be supposed" (Lacan, *Seminar XXIII*, 11). Lacan's Romanticism is, in a very direct sense, poetic, as figuration is the difference that all three levels have in common (Lacan, *Seminar XXIII*, 40). In the unpublished *Seminar XXV*, specifically the session of December 20, 1977, Lacan explains this poetic sinthome quite directly (by Lacanian standards). He had just been demonstrating an especially complex Borromean knot, comprised of a "six-fold torus" meant to illustrate the relationship between the Real and fantasy, as they intersect with knowledge and the pleasure principle. In an unexpected turn of argument, he concludes the demonstration by saying: "This puts a stress on the fact that there is no reality. Reality is constituted only by phantasy, and phantasy is moreover what gives material for poetry." Fantasy, in this way of thinking, produces two "realities": the "real world," as we experience it, and also literature. Literature becomes another plane of reality, just as "material" as the real world because it is made out of language. It is not that reality has poetic features; it is that poetry *is* a real world, no less real because it is fantasmatic: "The stuff of metaphor is that which in thought constitutes matter," Lacan explains. This, he asserts, is what makes psychoanalysis a form of "poetry": "it is art," he insists, and "it is poetry," even if it "functions as science." Although it acts as if it were a science, psychoanalysis is actually the art of "working in the impossible to say," as Lacan explains: "In any case what is involved in this practice is moreover poetry. I am speaking of the practice that is called analysis. Why did someone called Freud succeed in his poetry, I mean, in establishing a psychoanalytic art?" (Lacan, *Seminar XXV*, sec.20.12.77). Lacan, the purveyor of literary language, is in effect his own sinthome: the psychoanalyst, as poet of the impossible, binds together the strands discovered in the overlaid term "Lacan's Romanticism."

Lacan tended to see Romantic poetry as the unspoken or hidden part of psychoanalysis and an important “silent partner” for Freud. Here I am using the term “silent partner” in the sense that Slavoj Žižek uses it: thinkers “connected to his thought by a secret link, and ... crucial for a proper understanding of his work” (Žižek, 1). Hence, a return to Freud is by extension also an engagement with British Romanticism. We find a clear case in point in Lacan’s analysis of Freud’s *Psychoanalytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia* (1911), commonly known as the Schreber case. Freud, Lacan points out, was able to read the lacunae in Schreber’s *Memoir of My Nervous Illness* (1903) by cross-referencing Schreber’s text with Lord Byron’s play *Manfred* (1817). Schreber, Freud observes, attributes the phrase “soul-murder” to Byron, and sees in *Manfred* a Faustian bartering for the soul (Freud *SE*, 12.44). Freud, knowing his Byron well, leaps into interpretive action: Byron’s text doesn’t speak of “soul-murder” or feature any soul-bartering—indeed, it’s *Manfred*’s refusal to barter that gives him his defiant dignity. Because *Manfred* was informing Schreber’s text through its own gaps and silences, in ways that exceed its actual content, Freud could surmise that Schreber was finding a way, through displacement, to tacitly acknowledge fraternal-sororal incest in his own biography (Freud *SE*, 12.44). Freud’s knowledge of Romantic literature enabled him to decode Schreber’s “censored chapter,” Lacan explains, which, being “missing in its entirety,” had “mutilated the text of his *Memoirs*” (Lacan, *Écrits*, 466). It is in this sense that true Freudians are necessarily Romantics by extension, one we can see Romantic-era writing as a silent partner of psychoanalytic reason. As the Schreber case reveals, the thematic preoccupations of the period’s literature can often address difficulties in contemporary psychiatric and psychoanalytic discourse.

William Wordsworth provides a crucial case in point, because he both attracts Lacan’s attention and laments the loss of primordial *jouissance*. In *Seminar VII*, Lacan quotes the phrase “The Child is father of the Man,” a famous line from the epigraph to Wordsworth’s “Ode: Intimations of Immortality” (Lacan, *Seminar VII*, 24). Because the statement is a metaphor, and because it arrives into the seminar by way of allusion, we are already knee-deep in figural language, even at the outset. Interestingly, Lacan quotes Wordsworth to highlight the difference between his own psychoanalytic musings and a Romantic sensibility, calling Wordsworth’s sentiment “a dated notion that was born long before psychoanalysis.” Yet he also recognizes an affiliation between Wordsworth’s “notion” and the Freudian project, explaining to his audience that, “the phrase comes from Wordsworth, the English romantic poet, and is quoted respectfully by Freud” (Lacan, *Seminar VII*, 24). In the following year’s Seminar, Lacan reopens this point in a new context, explaining that the tendency for artists to identify with children “dates

back to the beginning of the Romantic period, starting more or less at the time of Coleridge in England" (*Seminar VIII*, 239).

Guinn Batten has published an extensive analysis of Lacan's allusion to Wordsworth in *Seminar VII*. In Batten's reading, Lacan invokes Wordsworth to explain that, although people generally want immediate solutions to their problems, from either poetry or psychoanalysis, poetry, like psychoanalysis, can only hold open the Real (Batten, 577). Indeed, that is the context in which Lacan alludes to Wordsworth. Yet, I am equally interested in the discussion that immediately follows, because Lacan's allusion initiates a movement in the opposite direction: instead of continuing to draw a continuity between nineteenth-century poetry and post-Freudian psychoanalysis, Lacan begins to insist that Wordsworth's idea is "historically situated." Certainly, the idea that Wordsworth was capturing—that is, that childhood memories endure into adulthood and largely shape the psychic life of adults—is an idea with a long history of its own. As Lacan reminds us, psychoanalysis is just the latest iteration of

that reference to childhood, the idea of the child in the man, the idea that something demands that a man be something other than a child, but that the demands of the child as such are perpetually felt in him.

(*Seminar VII*, 24–25)

Yet it is not a universal sentiment. Lacan stresses that the pernicious continuation of childhood in other forms, an idea fundamental to psychoanalysis, is particularly an innovation of British writing of the Romantic period. As he puts it:

It is no accident that we discover it in that period with its fresh, shattering, and even breathtaking quality, bursting forth at the beginning of the nineteenth century with the industrial revolution, in the country that was most advanced in experiencing its effects, in England. English romanticism has its own special features, which include the value given to childhood memories, to the whole world of childhood, to the ideals and wishes of the child. And the poets of the time drew on this not only for the source of their inspiration, but also for the development of their principal themes—in this respect they are radically different from the poets who preceded them and especially from that wonderful poetry of the seventeenth and early eighteenth century.

(Lacan, *Seminar VII*, 24–25)

The noteworthy thing for me is not that Lacan urges psychoanalysts to perform a task traditionally handled by poetry, which is Batten's

emphasis, but rather that he historicizes Romanticism by stressing the “special features ... of the time.” Lacan understands Romanticism to be part of a cultural superstructure formed in parallel with a new industrial-capitalist economy, which is why, in his estimation, it sharply differs from older traditions of poetry, or poetry from other countries. It is English Romanticism in particular that begins to respond to the legacy of childhood enduring, unconsciously, into adulthood.

It is not actually clear that Romanticism even evinced a new and different attitude toward childhood. “What was novel about the representation of childhood in canonical Romantic writing?” asks Alan Richardson: “In many ways, nothing” (171). It was more the recombination of several longstanding views. Yet, Wordsworth’s Immortality Ode was an important cultural touchstone for discussions of childhood throughout the nineteenth century, as Richardson notes—and, I would add, it is in this context that Freud would have received Wordsworth’s poem. This is how and why the word “intimations” is, as Jacques Derrida observes, “exposed in its very depths to psychoanalytic radiation” (112). The metaphor “The Child is father of the Man,” like Lacan’s invocation of it, goes far beyond merely affirming the enduring legacy of childhood. By the time Lacan seizes upon this line in 1959, we are already caught within a chain of texts: Lacan is quoting Wordsworth quoting Wordsworth in the epigraph to the Ode. Specifically, Wordsworth is quoting his own poem “My Heart Leaps Up,” which first appeared in his 1807 collection, *Poems in Two Volumes*. An early version of the Immortality Ode appeared as the final poem in that collection, then without the epigraph or its conclusion. Those, along with the poem’s subtitle about “Intimations of Immortality,” were added for the revised 1815 version. Thus, the Immortality Ode in, in a sense, the “child,” but also “father,” but also the sibling, of “My Heart Leaps Up.” Hence, implicit to Lacan’s comment is both a shifting culture of childhood across the nineteenth century and an interplay between the two Wordsworth poems, across multiple versions. If we put these poems into closer contact with each other, in the context of Lacan’s commentary on childhood, Romanticism, we can locate the sinthome of Lacan’s Romanticism.

The two poems, each hinging on the line “The Child is father of the Man,” work at obvious cross-purposes, even as they complement one another. “My Heart Leaps Up” primarily expresses confidence that the speaker’s sentimental response to “A rainbow in the sky” is steadfast and permanent: “So was it ... / So is it now ... So be it when I shall grow old, / Or let me die!” (“My Heart,” ll.2–6). At a basic level, the poem is making exactly the opposite argument as the Immortality Ode: my feelings about rainbows are unchanging and reliable, the speaker of “My Heart” seems to be saying; I have lost my ability to rejoice at rainbows, confesses the speaker of the Immortality Ode. Yet, several details complicate this interpretation. The speaker says “so be it” instead of “so it

shall be," contrary to the dictates of the poem's iambic tetrameter. This turns the statement from what might have been a reliable promise to a performative demand. Yet, the speaker demands "it" from the Other only conditionally: the speaker shall be allowed to enjoy rainbows, "Or let me die!" The irony is of course that the speaker, like everyone, is indeed allowed to die—expected to do so, even. The hard dichotomy of this "or" functions like Lacan's *vel* of alienation, "Your money or your life!" (Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 211). That is, there is a zone of non-meaning between the two options, whereby the subject ends up with neither enjoyment of rainbows nor permission to die, because one of the options contains "the *lethal factor*" (*Seminar XI*, 213, emphasis in original). The speaker, through making a demand for enjoyment, soon finds himself between being and meaning, enjoying only in the defiles of the signifier, according to its narrow parameters. Because the speaker is presumably not immortal, the Other can only fulfill this demand while sapping the speaker of his enjoyment of rainbows. That is, the poem, which seems to demand a constant and lifelong access to enjoyment, actually dramatizes the ways that the subject must give up on his enjoyment to survive. Wordsworth is exploring the same dilemma that we identified above in *The Sorrows of Edith*: he mourns the enjoyment lost to the Other from which he must remain barred.

Wordsworth seems to think that the child, for a while, has access to the enjoyment from the great beyond, which is why the child is "always already dead" (Faflak, 156). I prefer to think of the poem as dramatizing the condition that Eric Santner calls "undeadness," which appears, according to Santner, "above all in the life of the child": as we are "placed in the space of relationality" with the Other, we discover in ourselves "an internal alienness that has a peculiar sort of vitality and yet *belongs to no form of life*" (36, emphasis in original). This condition, at the heart of the Immortality Ode, is what activates the allusion to "My Heart Leaps Up." That poem, after all, makes a demand for "de-animation," to again borrow Santner's term, rather than a demand for the restitution of *jouissance* (Santner, 44). The wished-for sacrifice is carried out through the materiality of the poem's language: "Or let me die!" an iambic line half as long as it ought to be, answers the speaker's demand by presenting its own lack and thus cutting itself short: you will die, deprived of your enjoyment, but until then you must draw what you can from the positive presence of that lack. Yet, once that line, "The Child is father of the Man," returns as the epigraph to the Immortality Ode in 1815, it has repressed the forced choice of this *vel*: Wordsworth quotes only the last three lines of "My Heart Leaps Up," making the line seem like a statement of fact rather than a fraught negotiation with the Other. This is highly appropriate, as the poem is very much an Ode to lost *jouissance*, presented as an irrecoverable "glory" and "freshness" (l.5). The poem experiments with line lengths, overemphatic



rhyme, and a flat, unconvincing tone, all of which highlight the way that language itself is what interferes with attempts at enjoyment: “The Rainbow comes and goes, / And lovely is the Rose,” offers the speaker halfheartedly (ll.10–11), in a couplet that mocks the main aspiration of “My Heart Leaps Up.” In the midst of his undeadness, the speaker learns to take a share of enjoyment through the repeated lament for lost enjoyment: stanza two awkwardly says “glorious” and “glory” in the space of three lines, as if an automated drive were looping around material repressed since childhood (ll.16, 18). The cost of this new, diminished “bliss,” though, is alienation and separation, which accounts for Wordsworth’s emphatic rhetoric of individuation through repetition: thoughts come “To me alone,” as the speaker imagines “a Tree, of many, one, / [in] A single field”; even “The Pansy,” Mariner-like, “Doth the same tale repeat” (ll.22, 54–55). The poem, through section 7, laments the abdication of *jouissance* through repression, which it blames on the Oedipus complex: Earth, having “a Mother’s mind,” is here thought to conspire with womankind in general (as represented by the synecdoche of the “homely Nurse”) to force “Man” to “Forget the glories he hath known” (ll.81–83). Wordsworth, through this misogynist fantasy, is interested in the ways that enjoyment is strictly delimited, especially confined to the processes of signification: “unto this he frames his song: / Then he will fit his tongue” (ll.96–97). The child, caught between “his mother’s kisses” and “his father’s eyes!” is stalked by the “imperial palace whence he came” (l.84)—namely, *jouissance*. The poem focuses on the boy’s burgeoning desire to reclaim a portion of that repressed *jouissance* through the signifier, “As if his whole vocation / Were endless imitation” (ll.106–107). Facing “the inevitable yoke” of language and ideology, the Wordsworthian subject refers enjoyment to the big Other, here called “nature.” A repository of discarded *jouissance*, “nature yet remembers / What was so fugitive,” and so, though we have no immediate access to our enjoyment, “in our embers / Is something that doth live” (ll.124–134). This “something” is the unconscious—a positivized absence that has effects everywhere but is unknowable directly. Once equipped with its self-allusive epigraph, the poem highlights the problem of making do with “primal sympathy,” that is, learning to be separated from oneself, so as to better generate partial enjoyment through the repeated rehearsal of lack, as accessed through the signifier.

Admittedly, I am reading Wordsworth’s invocations of nature a bit differently than does Batten or Faflak. For Batten, Lacan offers an implicit corrective to Wordsworth, in effect reminding us that “Nature *herself* must be liberated ... from the demand she liberate mankind” (579). I would agree that Wordsworth is theorizing fantasy and that Lacan is suspicious of any appeal to nature. Yet, to return to Lacan’s advisory from *Seminar XXV*, the poem, in its proto-Lacanian wisdom, emphatically posits that “reality is constituted only by phantasy, and

phantasy is moreover what gives material for poetry.” The key, in my brief reading of Wordsworth, is to see that nature is not the name for a lost “gleam” of enjoyment; rather, nature is a repository of signifiers, which “remembers” that gleam and is presumed to have access to it. It is not, then, that Wordsworth’s fantasy is “inevitably unrealizable,” as Batten supposes, or that the imagined child is always already dead, as Faflak would have it; quite to the contrary, fantasy creates the subject’s reality, the very conditions for his or her existence, once *jouissance* stops not being written (Batten, 579; Faflak, 156). What had seemed like a contrast between the two Wordsworth poems would now appear to be merely a time lapse: “My Heart Leaps Up” dramatizes an earlier moment in subject formation, in which the subject gives up on his enjoyment; “Ode” depicts the outcome of that process, namely desire, as the speaker becomes subjected to the autonomous repetitions of the drive. Lacan, ambiguously engaging both poems at once through their shared line, is reminding us that psychoanalysis developed out of a Wordsworthian vision of subjectivity. As we have seen, the psychoanalytic “content” of these poems arises from features of its form: allusion, repetition, rhyme, tone, meter, line length, and metaphor. This figural work connects Wordsworth to psychoanalysis and Lacan to Wordsworth, binding Lacan’s identification with Wordsworth (at the level of the Imaginary) to the materiality of Wordsworth’s poetic language (at the level of the Symbolic) and the Real of the speaker’s irretrievable *jouissance*.

In such a way, “Romanticism,” Lacan explains, “turns out to be a confused introduction to the dialectic of signifiers as such, of which psychoanalysis is, in short, the articulated form” (*Seminar V*, 123). That is, Romanticism enacts the dialectic of signifiers, while psychoanalysis explains it. Lacan thought that British Romanticism had a special role in the history of psychoanalytic thought. The period’s writing, he found, curtails the free play of the id in language that had characterized earlier authors like Molière. Love was a central concept for Molière’s, says Lacan, “and it will [would] remain so”—that is, it would remain a crucial theme in European literature—“until the appearance of Romanticism” (*Seminar V*, 123). Thus, Romanticism functioned as a cut in literary discourse, offering the literary tradition only a loss: it reduced the grand comedy of love to a matter of signification, permanently delimiting the function of the literary libido. This would seem, at first glance, to have been a blow to literature—indeed, exactly the type of blow that Wordsworth laments in the Immortality Ode. Yet, that blow, Lacan explains, laid the foundations of psychoanalysis, which is why British Romanticism can serve as a “confused introduction” to the psychoanalytic field. Today, meaning in our post-Lacanian world, we are liable to discover “the well-rehearsed, basic Lacanian narrative of the foundation of the individual subject upon ‘lack’ ... ending in our initiation into the

Symbolic order” when we read Romantic poetry, as Hewitt points out in his analysis of Percy Bysshe Shelley (787). But, it is not that the Romantic poets had miraculous premonitions of a future psychoanalysis; rather, it is that Lacan, like Freud, had inherited a Romantic model of the psyche and of language. Romanticism, in Lacan’s view, marks a transitional moment in the history of subjectivity: it tells the stories of subjects learning to desire through the signifier. Romanticism marks

the pivotal moment at which the presentation of relations between the id and language, in the form of a taking possession of language by the id, is about to give way to the introduction of the dialectic of man’s relations with language in a blind, closed form.

(Lacan, *Seminar V*, 123)

This tragic dialectic, supposedly invented by Romantic poets and writers, would in the following century become the core of what makes Lacan, Lacan.

This dialectic of the signifier led Lacan, later in his career, to engage with analytic philosophers who were theorizing, from their logician’s standpoint, the grammatical function of proper names (see Frege, Russell). In doing so, he again placed Romantic-era writing at the crux of the debate, as he began to theorize the *sinthome*. Here, we can see how Lacan’s Romanticism at the level of the Real comes back to dislodge a more conventional, and purely Symbolic, interest in the legacy of Romanticism within philosophical circles. I want to show how, on the one hand, Lacan’s engagement of Romanticism is structured across three levels, like a Borromean knot, and tied together at the level of figuration, and on the other hand, how Lacan’s theorization of the Borromean knot, and the *sinthome* that ties it, arises out of his engagement with British Romanticism. Because Lacan’s Seminar on “The *Sinthome*” takes James Joyce as its subject, there is a tendency to associate the *sinthome* with highly challenging modernist writing (Colebrook, 65; Sass). Yet, Lacan was thinking about the *sinthome* in relation to Walter Scott—a Romantic-era novelist not known for reveling in the playfulness of *lalangue*—in previous years.

Taking up an example debated by Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell, Lacan, in *Seminar XVIII*, stresses that the name “Sir Walter Scott” is not grammatically equivalent to the phrase “the author of *Waverley*” (Lacan, *Seminar XVIII*, sec.13.1.1971). For Frege and Russell, the question has nothing to do with Walter Scott or *Waverley* (1814): they are simply testing the grammatical limits of using the name of a text to stand in for the name of an author. Frege argues that proper names have a sense (*Sinn*) separate from their reference (*Bedeutung*); Russell is more interested in the work of denotation. Yet, the example of Scott is far from typical, given how Scott actually did sign his works “The Author

of *Waverley*,” as part of an elaborate attempt to efface himself from his texts. As Andrew Parker has perceptively argued, Scott himself, being especially attuned to the unconscious, was unsure if he even *was* the “author of *Waverley*.” As Parker explains:

Scott hesitated to identify his fictions simply as his own; he may have written the novels that were formerly anonymous—their manuscripts (most of them, anyway) betray the sign of his own ‘hand’—but whether he can claim to be their author is another question entirely... . To acknowledge one’s works as one’s own, then, is to admit the possibility that they always may not be. This potential remains haunting for Scott.

(82–83)

Lacan, responding to Frege and Russell, seems to understand this dimension of Scott’s work: he slyly says that Scott was “effectively the author of the *Waverley* novels” (*Seminar XVIII*, sec.13.11.1971). Though it seems like a subtle shift, such an intervention completely derails the debate between Frege and Russell: Lacan has gone far beyond a semantic question and has begun to question whether Scott really *was* the author of these novels. He even seems to doubt whether the novel is called *Waverley* in any case—perhaps implicitly acknowledging that Frege had been discussing Scott’s entire series of “*Waverley* novels,” or that the first novel had a subtitle, “or, ’Tis Sixty Years Since”—and so settles for simply calling the text “this work that is called *Waverley*” (*Seminar XVIII*, sec.13.1.1971). This uncertainty, too, completely destroys the example. Lacan seems bent on demonstrating that “there is only one *Bedeutung* [meaning, signification], *die Bedeutung des Phallus*” (*Seminar XVIII*, 13.1.1971). By 1975, as he concludes *Seminar XXII*, Lacan suggests that “Sir Walter Scott” cannot be “the author of *Waverley*” in any straightforward way, because the Real interferes at the moment of seeming confluence between these terms:

The descriptions of Russell, those that question themselves about the author, those that ask why it is legitimate and logically fragile to question the fact of whether or not Walter Scott is the author of *Waverley*, it seems that this reference explicitly concerns what is individualised by the thought-out support of bodies. It is certainly in fact nothing of the kind. The notion of referent aims at the Real. It is as Real, that what the logicians imagine as Real, gives its support to the referent.

(Lacan, *Seminar XXII*, sec.13.05.75)

This is what leads Lacan to promise to develop a theory of the *sinthome* for the next year. Although that seminar ended up focusing on

James Joyce, it was Walter Scott, who was “effectively” the author of “this work which is called *Waverley*,” who pointed him the think about

nomination from the Imaginary as inhibition, nomination from the Real as ... anxiety, or nomination from the ... flower of the Symbolic itself, ... as it happens in fact in the form of the symptom.

(*Seminar XXII*, sec.13.05.75)

Lacan, following what he calls “the impetus of metaphor,” has identified the need for a fourth term that will tie this Borromean knot (*Seminar XXII*, sec.17.12.74). Here again, Lacan uses his surprisingly specific knowledge of British Romantic writing to intervene in a philosophical debate, this time complicating the meaning of the author-function through an oblique acknowledgment of Scott’s own authorial anxieties. Lacan, engaging a debate about names that was confined to the Symbolic register, identifies an anxiety in Scott arising at the level of the Imaginary, to consider the vengeance of the Real as it “gives its support to the referent.”

What the Romantics understood about language, says Lacan, was the same thing that Freud grasped in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*: that “the pleasure in a joke is only complete in the Other and through the Other” (Lacan, *Seminar V*, 93). Because the *jouissance* is always transferred to the Other’s account, there arises a need for a figural level, through the blankness of the master signifier, to make fantasy sustainable: “this indeed is what constitutes the privilege of the phallus, it is that you can summon it as much as you like, it will always say nothing” (Lacan, *Seminar XVIII*, sec.13.1.1971). No writing can achieve this fusion of levels fully—but Lacan implies that writing comes closest to this ideal during “the fertile Romantic period” (Lacan, *Seminar V*, 92). It is specifically English Romanticism that marked these developments, as Lacan sees it:

The question of *Witz* is there at the heart of all Romantic speculation, which will hold our interest as much from a historical point of view as from that of the situation of analysis. What is altogether striking is that there is nothing in France that corresponds to this interest.

(*Seminar V*, 14)

He does not offer an opinion as to why this would have been an English phenomenon, specifically, or what makes Romanticism especially “fertile.” Yet, elaborating, he explains:

After the eighteenth century with Addison, Pope, and so on, this discussion continues into the early nineteenth century with the English

Romantic school, where the question of wit could not fail to be put on the agenda. Hazlitt's writings are very significant in this regard. It was Coleridge, whom we will have occasion to discuss, who went the furthest in this direction.

(Lacan, *Seminar V*, 13)

Lacan never did seem to find "occasion" to discuss Coleridge at greater length. But, he did remain committed to the idea that understanding British Romanticism makes possible a different and better—and more Freudian—understanding of psychoanalysis. A Freudian praxis that understands the legacy of British Romanticism, Lacan suggests, will be less normative and prescriptive than it is prone to be:

These considerations incite us to reexamine the true, solid backbone of Freud's thought. No doubt psychoanalysis has ended up ordering all the material of its experience in terms of an ideal development. But at its beginning [i.e., in Romanticism], it finds its terms in a wholly different system of references, to which development and genesis only give intermittent support.

(Lacan, *Seminar VII*, 25)

Here again, Lacan holds British Romanticism, then, to be "psychoanalysis ... at its beginning," a period valuable to psychoanalysis for its lack of interest in molding people according to normative developmental patterns. Romanticists such as Faflak have maintained that Romantic-era psychoanalysis could fashion alternatives to normative Freudian orthodoxies, working "beyond the Freudian ken of an analytic cure" (Faflak, 230). Lacan, however, sees British Romanticism as the key to a more thoroughgoing fidelity to Freud and as the "true, solid backbone" of psychoanalysis. Romanticism, through its experiments in figuration, taught Lacan how to be more rigorously Freudian, and in this sense, made Lacan "Lacan."

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