

Jacques LACAN

# ÉCRITS

The FIRST Complete Edition in English

Translated by BRUCE FINK

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ÉCRITS

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BY JACQUES LACAN

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*The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book I*

*The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book II*

*The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book III*

*The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book VII*

*The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XX*

*Écrits: A Selection*

*Feminine Sexuality*

*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*

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JACQUES LACAN  
ÉCRITS

THE FIRST COMPLETE  
EDITION IN ENGLISH

TRANSLATED BY  
BRUCE FINK

IN COLLABORATION WITH  
HÉLOÏSE FINK  
AND  
RUSSELL GRIGG



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## Translator's Note

The translation provided here includes all 35 of the texts published in the complete French edition of Lacan's *Écrits* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1966), only nine of which were included in *Écrits: A Selection* (New York and London: Norton, 2002). About half of these texts have never come out in English before, and the translation supplied here for each text is entirely new.

Given the degree to which Lacan's texts have been—and will continue to be, I suspect—subjected to close readings, I have been careful to respect his terminology as much as possible. I have translated here with the notion that the repetition of terms from one sentence to the next, from one paragraph to the next, and from one text to the next, may be springboards for future interpretations and have attempted to either repeat them identically in the translation or at least provide the French in brackets or endnotes so that the repetition is not lost.

All paragraph breaks here correspond to Lacan's, and the original French pagination is included in the margins to facilitate comparison with the French text, referred to throughout as "*Écrits* 1966." The footnotes included at the end of each text are Lacan's, several of which were added in the smaller two-volume edition published in the Points collection by Seuil in 1970 and 1971 as *Écrits I* and *Écrits II*, referred to throughout simply as "Points." Words or phrases followed by an asterisk (\*) are given by Lacan in English in the French original. Translator's interpolations are always placed in square

brackets and translator's notes are included at the back of the book, keyed to the marginal French pagination.

Although the texts are placed in chronological order for the most part, they were written for very different occasions and audiences and need not be read in any specific order (indeed, I'd recommend starting with "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter,'" "The Situation of Psychoanalysis in 1956," or "Function and Field"). It might be helpful to keep in mind that the first few pages of many of the texts are far more difficult than what follows, and that the persistent reader is usually well rewarded (the last few pages are often quite dense as well!). Should the English sometimes strike the reader as obscure, I can only point to the difficulty of the French original and indicate that I have already removed as many obscurities as I could at this time.

#### *Collaborators*

Héloïse Fink was a constant collaborator throughout this project, hashing out difficult formulations and constructions with me day in and day out, comparing the French and English line by line, and researching obscure terms and expressions. She helped me avoid myriad pitfalls, and together we explored the ways in which two languages encounter and miss each other.

Russell Grigg, psychoanalyst and professor of philosophy at Deakin University in Australia, provided innumerable corrections, alternative readings, and recommendations concerning style on the basis of his close comparison of the French and English texts. He made a very substantial contribution to the finished product.

A number of other people helped me struggle with Lacan's texts on a more occasional basis. Jacques-Alain Miller graciously devoted a couple of afternoons to helping me with some of Lacan's more difficult formulations and responded to further questions in writing; Dany Nobus commented extensively on the entire translation, providing myriad corrections, small and large, and hundreds of references; Slavoj Žižek advised me on a number of Hegelian references; Richard Klein (Cornell University) supplied insight into several passages; Henry Sullivan (University of Missouri-Columbia) provided useful comments on "The Mirror Stage"; Stacey E. Levine (Duquesne University) checked the mathematical footnote in "Position of the Unconscious"; Marc Silver collaborated on a draft of "Logical Time" that we published in 1988 and made valuable suggestions regarding "Function and Field"; Mario Beira gave

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I have also looked to several published sources for help with references, including Anthony Wilden’s early translation of Lacan’s “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis” in *The Language of the Self* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), William Richardson and John Muller’s *Lacan and Language* (New York: International Universities Press, 1982) and their edited collection *The Purloined Poe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), James Swenson’s translation of “Kant with Sade” in *October* 51 (1989), and Alan Sheridan’s 1977 version of *Écrits: A Selection*. The first four provide far more notes than I could include here and readers may find their additional notes helpful. I have checked the notes I have borrowed for further corroboration and my judgment will sometimes be seen to differ from theirs.

Despite input from several collaborators and consultation of varied sources (my favorites being the recent *Robert: Dictionnaire historique de la langue française* and the voluminous *Trésor de la langue française*), numerous errors no doubt remain. Lacan’s incredibly broad background and in-depth knowledge of psychiatry, psychoanalysis, philosophy, mathematics, and literature are such that I have surely misunderstood specialized terminology, overlooked references to specific authors, and just generally misinterpreted the French—Lord knows it’s easy enough to do given Lacan’s singular style! Readers who believe they have found mistakes of whatever kind are encouraged to send comments to me via the publisher. I consider this translation a work in progress, and hope to improve on the texts here in future editions. A small number of typos found in the 2002 version of *Écrits: A Selection* have been fixed here, and a few footnotes to the texts included in it have been corrected and several other footnotes have been added.

*Bruce Fink*

*Abbreviations Used in the Text*

<i>GW</i>	<i>Gesammelte Werke</i> (Sigmund Freud)
<i>IJP</i>	<i>International Journal of Psycho-Analysis</i>
IPA	International Psycho-Analytical Association
<i>PQ</i>	<i>Psychoanalytic Quarterly</i>
PUF	Presses Universitaires de France
<i>RFP</i>	<i>Revue Française de Psychanalyse</i>
<i>SE</i>	<i>Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud</i>

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## Overture to this Collection

“The style is the man himself,” people repeat without seeing any harm in it, and without worrying about the fact that man is no longer so sure a reference point. Besides, the image of the cloth that adorned Buffon while he wrote is there to keep us inattentive.

A re-edition of *Voyage à Montbard* (published posthumously in the year IX by the Solvet press), penned by Hérault de Séchelles—the title alters that of the edition published in 1785, *Visite à Buffon*—gives us pause for thought. Not simply because one finds in it another style, which prefigures the best of our buffoonish reporting, but because it resituates the saying itself in a context of impertinence in which the host is in no wise outdone by his guest.

For the man discussed in the adage—which was already classic by that time [1785], having been extracted from Buffon’s discourse to the Academy—proves, in Séchelles’ portrait, to be a fantasy of the great man, Buffon turning it into a scenario that involves his whole household. There is nothing natural here; Voltaire generalizes maliciously on this point, as we recall.

Shall we adopt the formulation—the style is the man—if we simply add to it: the man one addresses?

This would be simply to comply with the principle I have proposed: that in language our message comes to us from the Other, and—to state

the rest of the principle—in an inverted form. (Let me remind you that this principle applied to its own enunciation since, although I proposed it, it received its finest formulation from another, an eminent interlocutor.)

But if man were reduced to being nothing but the echoing locus of our discourse, wouldn't the question then come back to us, "What is the point of addressing our discourse to him?"

That is the question posed to me by the new reader, this reader being the reason that has been put forward to convince me to publish a collection of my writings.

I am offering this reader an easy entryway into my style by opening this collection with "The Purloined Letter," even though that means taking it out of chronological order.

10 It will be up to this reader to give the letter in question, beyond those to whom it was one day addressed, the very thing he will find as its concluding word: its destination. Namely, Poe's message deciphered and returning from him, the reader, so that in reading this message he realizes that he is no more feigned than the truth is when it inhabits fiction.

This "purloining of the letter" [*vol de la lettre*] will be said to be the parody of my discourse, whether one confines one's attention to the etymology of "parody," which indicates an accompaniment and implies the precedence of the trajectory that is parodied, or, in returning to the usual meaning of the term, one sees the shadow of the intellectual master dispelled in it in order to obtain the effect that I prefer to it.

The title of the poem "The Rape of the Lock"\* [*le vol de la boucle*] is evoked here in which Pope, thanks to parody, ravishes—from the epic, in his case—the secret feature of its derisory stakes.

Our task brings back this charming lock, in the topological sense of the term [*boucle* also means loop]: a knot whose trajectory closes on the basis of its inverted redoubling—namely, such as I have recently formulated it as sustaining the subject's structure.

It is here that my students would be right to recognize the "already" for which they sometimes content themselves with less well-founded homologies.

For I decipher here in Poe's fiction, which is so powerful in the mathematical sense of the term, 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 that I am

raising right at the outset. In the place man marked for Buffon, I call for the falling away [*chute*] of this object, which is revealing due to the fact that the fall isolates this object, both as the cause of desire in which the subject disappears and as sustaining the subject between truth and knowledge. With this itinerary, of which these writings are the milestones, and this style, which the audience to whom they were addressed required, I want to lead the reader to a consequence in which he must pay the price with elbow grease.

October 1966

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## Seminar on “The Purloined Letter”

*Und wenn es uns glückt,  
Und wenn es sich schickt,  
So sind es Gedanken.*

My research has led me to the realization that repetition automatism (*Wiederholungszwang*) has its basis in what I have called the *insistence* of the signifying chain. I have isolated this notion as a correlate of the *ex-sistence* (that is, of the eccentric place) in which we must necessarily locate the subject of the unconscious, if we are to take Freud’s discovery seriously. As we know, it is in the experience inaugurated by psychoanalysis that we can grasp by what oblique imaginary means the *symbolic* takes hold in even the deepest recesses of the human organism.

The teaching of this seminar is designed to maintain that imaginary effects, far from representing the core of analytic experience, give us nothing of any consistency unless they are related to the symbolic chain that binds and orients them.

I am, of course, aware of the importance of imaginary impregnations (*Prägung*) in the partializations of the symbolic alternative that give the signifying chain its appearance. Nevertheless, I posit that it is the law specific to this chain which governs the psychoanalytic effects that are determinant for the subject—effects such as foreclosure (*Verwerfung*), repression (*Verdrängung*), and negation (*Verneinung*) itself—and I add with the appropriate emphasis that these effects follow the displacement (*Entstellung*) of the signifier so faithfully that imaginary factors, despite their inertia, figure only as shadows and reflections therein.

But this emphasis would be lavished in vain if it merely served, in your

view, to abstract a general form from phenomena whose particularity in analytic experience would remain the core thing to you and whose original composite nature could be broken down only through artifice.

This is why I have decided to illustrate for you today a truth which may be drawn from the moment in Freud's thought we have been studying—namely, that it is the symbolic order which is constitutive for the subject—by demonstrating in a story the major determination the subject receives from the itinerary of a signifier.

It is this truth, let us note, that makes the very existence of fiction possible. Thus a fable is as appropriate as any other story for shedding light on it—provided we are willing to put the fable's coherence to the test. With this proviso, a fable even has the advantage of manifesting symbolic necessity all more purely in that we might be inclined to believe it is governed by the arbitrary.

This is why, without looking any further, I have taken my example from the very story in which we find the dialectic of the game of "even or odd," from which we very recently gleaned something of importance. It is probably no accident that this story proved propitious for the continuation of a line of research which had already relied upon it.

As you know, I am referring to the tale Baudelaire translated into French as "La lettre volée." In it we must immediately distinguish between a drama and its narration as well as the conditions of that narration.

We quickly perceive, moreover, what makes these components necessary and realize that their composer could not have created them unintentionally.

For the narration effectively doubles the drama with a commentary without which no *mise-en-scène* would be possible. Let us say that the action would remain, strictly speaking, invisible to the audience—aside from the fact that the dialogue would be expressly and by dramatic necessity devoid of whatever meaning it might have for a listener. In other words, nothing of the drama could appear, either in the framing of the images or the sampling of the sounds, without the oblique light shed, so to speak, on each scene by the narration from the point of view that one of the actors had while playing his role in it.

There are two such scenes, the first of which I shall immediately designate as the primal scene, and by no means inattentively, since the second may be considered its repetition in the sense of the latter term that I have been articulating in this very seminar.

The primal scene is thus performed, we are told, in the royal boudoir, such that we suspect that the "personage of most exalted station," also referred to as the "illustrious personage," who is alone there when she receives a letter, is the Queen. This sense is confirmed by the awkward situation she is put in "by the entrance of the other exalted personage," of whom we have already

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