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Clinic of the Clinamen: The Materiality of the Symptom

My clinical work with analysands who have changed sex has allowed me to understand that they had a very peculiar relation to their bodies. Everything took place as if the imaginary of their bodies had disappeared, like an open envelope letting go of its contents. While it is obvious that the Real of the body is the stuff of concrete physical matter, the materiality of the body is another matter altogether. When someone changes sex, such transformation implies that the materiality of the body, which one may believe could have been defined by organs that are more or less visible, is a materiality not given but constructed. Anatomy, with its chromosomes, gametes, and genitalia, becomes then part of a mythical real that acquires signification only on a second stage, when the values of the sex assigned at birth are structured and a sexual positioning is assumed. For psychoanalysis, sexual difference is neither sex nor gender. Sex needs to be symbolized. Gender needs to be embodied. To have a sexual body means reaching what we may call a second materiality. The materiality that is required to accomplish this is that of the letter. The letter gives a consistency to the knot that holds together the body on the three structural registers and allows for a new distribution of jouissance.

My thoughts are based on my clinical work as well as on my reading of some memoirs written by people who have changed sex, both perspectives made me conclude that for the body “to hold,” a second materialization needs to take place; this is accomplished by way of torsions knotted by writing. Lucretius’ notion of the “clinamen” will allow me to explore trauma in a new light. I’ll give two clinical cases that illustrate the evolution of the symptom from a metaphor to an “effect of the Symbolic in the Real”. One case is an artist who finds a way of enjoying her unconscious, which brings a solution to her gender trouble; the other case is a transsexual man who uses scientific writing as a way of holding his body together and with it, of building a sexual identity. These cases point to the new materiality of the symptom.

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My general thesis is that Lacan moves from a theory of the signifier, that is to say, from language in the form it is accessible to psychoanalysis which is the theory condensed in the formula “The unconscious is structured like a language” towards a theory of the symptom as it is developed under the frame of the dialectic materialism. This is why Lacan proposed that Marx and not Freud introduced the notion of symptom¹. Such notion of the symptom implies that the symptom is found in the real and not in the symbolic. Or, more precisely,

the *symptom* that we identify is what is produced in the field of the Real. If the Real manifests itself in analysis and not only in analysis, if the notion of the symptom was introduced, well before Freud by Marx, so as to make it the sign of something which is what is not working out in the Real, if in other words, we are capable of operating on the symptom, it is in as far as the symptom is the effect of the Symbolic in the Real.²

There will be, however, a third moment around 1976, when Lacan revisits insights dating from the 1950s on the subject of the ego (“moi”) and the symptom; they show that the knot of the symptom stems from a particular rewriting of the subject, which introduces a torsion of the Real.

One can clearly observe a first period in a well-known passage of seminar XI devoted to the couple *tuché* and *automaton*. It is enough to read closely page 63 of the seminar to become aware of how the relation to the real is ruled over by *tuché*, defined at the beginning of the chapter on *tuché* and *automaton* as “the encounter with the real”³. We also perceive that it is an accident that determines this relation: “If the development is entirely animated by accident, by the obstacle of the *tuché*, it is in so far as the *tuché* brings us back to the the same at which pre-Socratic philosophy sought to motivate the world itself. It required a clinamen, an inclination, at some point.”⁴ The discussion that follows is complex: it revisits the concept of negation in Democritus, for whom physics are founded on the notion of nothing (“nothing is more real than nothing” was one

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¹ Jacques Lacan, “Le séminaire de Jacques Lacan : R.S.I.”, in *Ornicar ?*, 2, p. 96; 10 December 1974.

² *Ibid.*

³ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book 11*, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York: Norton, 1981, p. 53.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

of his favorite maxims.) A certain concept of negativity was introduced into the heart of the Greek cosmos by Democritus who, moreover, held that thought and soul were material. Lucretius in his *De rerum natura*⁵ gives very clear and compelling original atomist theory which explains how the properties of materials like water, air, metal, or even plants and animals are recreated—the indivisible properties not easily visible to human senses is contained in “atoms”. These “atoms” are nearer to our modern concept of “molecule” than to the atoms of modern science. Lucretius argues that the void, a lot of open space between “atoms” is absolutely necessary to explain how gasses and fluids can change shape, flow, while metals can be molded, without changing the basic material properties. Michel Serres insists on the drift in the movement through the void as shown in his illuminating reading of Lucretius.⁶ It is the *clinamen*, that is, the atomic deviation or “swerve,” that functioned as the key: “deviation is the birth of everything”. If we take Serres’s terminology and compare it with Lacan’s, we see obvious parallels.

Lacan had insisted on the “nothing” put forward by Democritus in Seminar XI. Lacan uses the Lucretian *clinamen* to think the logic of trauma. If we agree to take the deviation that upsets a preceding equilibrium as *tuche* or an effect of the *clinamen*, this conception will introduce turbulence into an unconscious “structured like a language”. By introducing chance, turbulence makes the unconscious a less closed system. Another point of analogy is that atoms, as Serres explains, are letters, which combined into sentences, can be joined to form volumes. If we can speak at all, it is because of this deviation. The *clinamen* introduces a breakup of order, and is thus radically opposed to repetition. Michel Serres writes that “meaning is a bifurcation of univocity.” Turbulence disturbs repetition by troubling the flow of the identical, and pulls and pushes in the same way as the symptom does, an issue to which I will return. Psychoanalytic work will use turbulence in a deliberate practice of equivocation and verbal punning so as to undo the set of fixed and univocal meanings initially presented by the analysand. This is why Lacan talks about the “phaunétique” dimension of the letter in Joyce, between phoneme, phonetique and phaune:

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⁵ Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe*, trans. R.E. Latham, ed. John Godwin, London: Penguin, 2005.

⁶ Michel Serres, *La Naissance de la physique dans le texte de Lucrèce. Fleuves et turbulences*, Paris: Minuit, 1977.

If I call up the mythical figure of the phaune, it is to move towards another mythical and impossible figure, that of the hermaphrodite that often is guiding transsexual fantasies.

But before moving ahead on this very issue and with the idea of understanding Lacan's radical new concept of the symptom, I will sketch a rapid archeology of the notion of symptom in Lacan. In Seminar I from 1953–1954, *Freud's Papers on Technique*, one reads “the ego is structured exactly like a symptom. At the heart of the subject, it is only a privileged symptom, the human symptom par excellence, the mental illness of man”⁷. But Lacan very soon seems to abandon the idea of the ego as symptom or more interestingly the symptom as ego, something to which he will return in his seminar on Joyce more than twenty years later. In the next seminar of just one year later, *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*, one finds:

Because the symptom is in itself, through and through, signification, that is to say, truth, truth taking shape. It is to be distinguished from the natural index in that it is already structured in terms of the signified and signifier, with all that entails, namely the play of signifiers. Even within the concrete given of the symptom, there is already a precipitation into signifying material. The symptom is the inverse side of a discourse.⁸

One can hear here a preview of the 1969–1970 Seminar 17, *L'envers or The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, with its four discourses, but I would insist here on the reference to signifiers as material or to the materiality of the signifier. I want to focus on these formulations because they take distance from those better known from 1956–57, in which the symptom is conceived of as a metaphor, therefore “The symptom is nothing but a metaphor”⁹ and of course in “The instance of the letter in the unconscious:” in which the metaphor is defined as “one word for another”. Lacan explains that

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⁷ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book 1: Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953–1954*, trans. John Forrester, New York: Norton, 1988, p. 16, 13 January 1954.

⁸ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book 2: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954–1955*, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 320; 29 June 1955.

⁹ Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire, livre IV, La relation d'objet*, Paris: Seuil, 1994.

Metaphor's two-stage mechanism is the very mechanism by which symptoms, in the analytic sense are determined. Between the enigmatic signifier of sexual trauma and the term it comes to replace in a current signifying chain, a spark flies that fixes in a symptom—a metaphor in which flesh or function is taken as a signifying element—the signification, that is inaccessible to the conscious subject, by which the symptom may dissolve.¹⁰

The practice of the “variable-length psychoanalytic session,” Lacan's controversial technique of scansion, tries to introduce a cut into a cycle of repetition, interfering with the jouissance by introducing an inclination, a clinamen. Like a pun, the cut of the scansion reorganizes letters and sends the analysand towards an enigma whose resolution is not found in historical reconstruction but in the invention of new signifiers. The idea is to cause an effect of nomination and not of symbolic or metaphoric substitution. This is a movement that, unlike that of a metaphor, is not reversible. It is not moving down the chain as in the false knot that one finds in the Olympic rings, but a true Borromean knot in which all three rings are so interdependent that if we cut one, the other three come loose. The issue here is not to replace one ring with another but to pull strings that will tighten a knot. Already in the session of December 19 1974, Lacan talks about the limits of the metaphor, and proposes putting aside meaning. I read this as proposing that the resolution of the symptom is no longer a ciphering of a hidden meaning but rather the creation of something new appearing in the void.

The big change in Lacan's theorization of the symptom takes place in 1974, the year of seminar RSI. In fact just before launching of the seminar, on October 31 1974, in the “Discours de Rome – La troisième” Lacan declares: “I call symptom what comes from the real”. This idea is further developed in the opening session of RSI when Lacan comments on a strike:

as analyst, I can only take the strike to be a symptom, in the sense that this year perhaps, I will manage to convince you of it, that the symptom, to refer to one of my three categories, belongs to the Real.¹¹

¹⁰ Jacques Lacan, “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious”, in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006, p. 431.

¹¹ “Le séminaire de Jacques Lacan : R.S.I.”, 19 November 1974 (unpublished).

...it is in the *symptom* that we identify what is produced in the field of the Real. If the Real manifests itself in analysis and not only in analysis, if the notion of the symptom was introduced, well before Freud by Marx, so as to make it the sign of something which is what is not working out in the Real, if in other words, we are capable of operating on the symptom, it is in as far as the symptom is the effect of the Symbolic in the Real.¹²

To look for the origin of the notion of symptom, which is not at all to be looked for in Hippocrates, which is to be looked for in Marx, who was the first in the link that he made between capitalism, and what? The good old times, what people call them when they want, in short, to try to call them something else, feudal times. Read all the literature on this. Capitalism is considered as having certain effects, and why in effect would it not have some! These effects are on the whole beneficial, since it has the advantage of reducing to nothing the proletarian man, thanks to which the proletarian man realises the essence of man, and by being stripped of everything is charged with being the Messiah of the future. Such is the way in which Marx analyses the notion of symptom. He gives of course crowds of other symptoms, but the relation of this with a faith in man is quite indisputable.¹³

If we make of man, no longer anything whatsoever who conveys a future ideal, but if we determine him from the particularity, in every case, of his unconscious and the way in which he enjoys it, the symptom remains at the same place that Marx put it, but it takes on a different meaning. It is not a social symptom, it is a particular symptom. No doubt, these particular symptoms correspond to types, and the symptom of the obsessional is not the symptom of the hysteric.¹⁴

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Lacan's 1974–1975 RSI seminar is a turning-point. In it, Lacan systematically introduces the Borromean knot. This knot is made out of the intertwining of three rings, which correspond to the tripartite structure Lacan called the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic orders. Although heterogeneous, these registers can intersect and hold together. Lacan chose the Borromean knot because of its main characteristic—the rings are so interdependent that if one ring is unknotted-

¹² “Le séminaire de Jacques Lacan : R.S.I.” in *Ornicar ?*, 2, p. 96; 10 December 1974.

¹³ “Le séminaire de Jacques Lacan : R.S.I.” in *Ornicar ?*, 4, p. 106; 18 February 1975.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

ted, the other three come loose. The Borroeman knot ties up together the registers of the Symbolic, the Real, and the Imaginary whose interlocking circles sustain reality for the subject. This “Borromeization” of the unconscious has direct consequences on the clinic and leads to a new definition of the symptom. Lacan breaks away from the medical model and brings the symptom closer to a mathematical function.

By the time of RSI, Lacan was working in mathematical topology and knot theory, borrowing a syntax and vocabulary in an effort to offer a formalization of what he observed in the analytic experience. This shift from linguistics to topology carries along major clinical consequences. In the same manner that Marx became aware that ancient materialism implied an effect of structure (if we cannot see atoms, we can think of their movement as turbulence; atoms fall following a slope, this is the principle of the clinamen, a deviation that operates in a void that by definition cannot be perceived), Lacan complicates the notion of matter and of materialism when he makes of *jouissance* his only ontology. This will be my focus here.

By the mid 1970s, Lacan no longer thought of the symptom as something to decode, a carrier of a repressed message (a signifier) that can be deciphered by reference to the unconscious “structured like a language,” but as the trace of the unique way someone can come to be and enjoy one’s unconscious. The symptom (which in 1976 will be renamed *sinthome*) is now considered an invention that allows someone to live by providing the essential organization of *jouissance*. “The symptom cannot be defined otherwise than by the way in which each one enjoys the unconscious.” At this point in Lacan’s elaboration, the aim of the cure is no longer to get rid of symptoms but to identify with one’s unique *sinthome* in order to enjoy it. Identification with the symptom occurs when one identifies with the particular form of their enjoyment from which hangs what and who someone is.

This rethinking of the symptom will have consequences concerning the end of analysis. The new symptom makes analysis terminable. If psychoanalysis helps “to provide for the analysand the meaning of their symptoms” (as Lacan wrote in the Introduction of the German edition of *Écrits*) is to not so much because the ultimate meaning of the symptom is finally deciphered, but because the analysand is somehow freed from engaging in an interminable search for meaning.

This does not mean that there is no revelation of truth. Since the truth lies (*la vérité ment*), the analysand can escape the interminable search down the metonymic chain of meanings, which inevitably leads to frustration and traps the analysand in the belief of an irreducible “knowledge without subject”¹⁵.

As we know Lacan will complete his theoretical quarter turn when he gives a new clinical meaning to the notion of symptom by rewriting it as *sinthome* in 1975–1976—this is Joyce’s *sinthome*. But this new contribution does not appear out of the blue since as he noted in 1975 “The *sinthome* is a way of writing what before was the symptom”.¹⁶ The symptom is what holds together the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary.¹⁷ Lacan places the symptom exactly at the place where the knot fails, where there is a “lapsus” in the knot¹⁸. The symptom is clearly located in the Real and it is knotted: “the symptom is considered like an equivalent of the real... the Imaginary, the body, what separates the body from the ensemble constituted by the knot of the symptom to the Symbolic”¹⁹.

I would like to highlight two very precise formulations from 1973, that is, a year before seminar RSI, given in the context of Lacan’s intervention in the La Grande Motte congress in November 2, 1973²⁰:

What I would like is that psychoanalysts were aware that everything has to bring them first to the solid support they find in the sign, and then that they should not forget that the symptom is a knot of signs. For the sign makes knots; ... this shows that knots are absolutely capital, as I try to demonstrate in my seminar.²¹

The first question is that there are types of symptoms, i.e. knots, that there is a clinic, a clinic that exists before the invention of analytic discourse, because Freud himself was its heir. Can analysis, can discourse, can the idea of the symptom as a knot, bring some light to this previous clinic? Yes, surely. Surely, but, alas, not certainly, here is the rub. It is not certain because certainty has

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¹⁵ Jacques Lacan, “Compte rendu de l’acte analytique” *Ornicar* ?, 29.

¹⁶ “Le séminaire de Jacques Lacan: Le *sinthome*” in *Ornicar* ?, 6, p. 3; 18 November 1975.

¹⁷ “Le séminaire de Jacques Lacan: Le *sinthome*” in *Ornicar* ?, 8, p. 15; 17 February 1976.

¹⁸ “Le séminaire de Jacques Lacan: Le *sinthome*” in *Ornicar* 8, p. 19; 17 February 1976.

¹⁹ “Le séminaire de Jacques Lacan: Le *sinthome*” in *Ornicar* 10, p. 12; 13 April 1976.

²⁰ Jacques Lacan, *Lettres de l’École Freudienne*, n° 15, 1975, pp. 69–80.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

to be transmitted and is demonstrated, and because history shows that this demand of science, which needs to transmit and demonstrate in order to impose something as certain, is a demand that is made much earlier than when it can be substantiated. One will create a theory of *épistémè*, as they say today, that is an epistemology, much before science proper can be born.²²

Lacan illustrates here in an exemplary manner the clinical value of the symptom as a knot. This is an idea that I find extremely helpful in my work with the most varied analysands, but in particular with transsexual analysands. With them, one can observe the emergence of a new materiality in meaning, a language that seems to abandon the signifying chain. This chain will then be replaced by the Borromean knot in so far as it precipitates into writing.

This is the idea that I wish to illustrate with my examples; it is also one of the lessons brought by RSI. Taking into account the complex relation that transgender people have to their bodies—many often say that they are trapped in a body of the wrong (opposite) sex—I claim that an art similar to that of actual artists can be found in transsexual artificiality. In some cases, this art is tantamount to a *symptom* (*sinthome*) with a structural function analogous to the role Lacan ascribed to art, as he discovered it in the writing of Joyce. In Joyce's case, his art was able to compensate for a defect in his subjective structure saving him from a destiny of madness. The *sinthome*-art grants access to a know-how which can repair faults in the psyche working as a supplement that holds together the registers of the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary in such a way that it fastens the subject in place.

In the RSI session of January 21 1975, Lacan discusses something he heard from a patient in his practice concerning the repetition of a symptom and he says the following: “The important thing is the reference to writing. The repetition of the symptom is this something that I have just said is writing in an untamed way, what is involved in the symptom as it is presented in my practice.”²³ Lacan sketches here the most fundamental features of what I call the clinic of the clinamen. We have chance encounter, the tythic occurrence that derives from

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²² *Ibid.*, p. 79.

²³ Jacques Lacan, “Le séminaire de Jacques Lacan: R.S.I.,” session of January 21 1975.

tuche, and almost at the same time its inscription in a writing process. I hope to illustrate this knotting of chance and necessity via writing in my examples.

Why do so many transsexuals write memoirs? This question has already been explored in an original manner by Jay Prosser²⁴. He examined the narratives of those who crossed sexes and concluded that transsexual somatic transitions are spurred and enabled by narrative. My position is slightly different—I suggest that transsexual memoirs allow us to see the function of art in ways that affect the life of everyone, men and women, transgender and cisgender²⁵ alike. The transsexual’s request for a physical and sexual transformation brings us close to the etymological meaning of *techné* which in Greek means both “technique” and “technology” rather than “art” in the sense of “fine-arts” as Heidegger has skillfully demonstrated. Other equivalents would be “expertise,” “technical knowledge” and even “science.” The art of the *sinthome* is art taken in this extended sense; it is a know-how, a sort of singular tacit knowledge that cannot transfer to another person but that holds the individual, preventing them from falling apart. In the case of sex-change memoirs one could argue that by way of writing the memoir gives the author a body that can be named. Writing elevates the unsymbolizable, the “invisible kernel, that meaningless fragment of the Real”²⁶ to something that can be named.

Prosser observed that transsexuals already are involved a writing process during their first visits to a clinician’s office where in order to be taken seriously a transsexual has to engage in a founding auto-biographical act, an act of recounting a plausible story of gender trouble triggered by an institutional request or demand. This mandatory account will facilitate a certain embodiment, and this autobiography “is also a kind of second skin: the story the transsexual must weave around the body in order that his body may be read”²⁷.

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²⁴ Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.

²⁵ “Cis” is as a prefix in Latin which means “on the same side [as]” or “on this side [of].” “Cisgender” or “cis male” or “cis female” are used to refer to those who do not identify as transgender.

²⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieślowski Between Theory and Post-Theory*, London: British Film Institute, 2001, p. 12.

²⁷ Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, p. 101.

Prosser chooses here a very loaded word, since most transsexual persons use the verb “read” to mean “guessing somebody’s anatomical identity.” Being “read” often entails “to pass” or “not to pass” for other than one is. Max Wolf Valerio, an American Indian/Latino poet, writer, and performer who transitioned from feminist lesbian woman to heterosexual man, chronicled in detail the first 5 years of his hormonal and social transformation from female to male. To his chagrin, he discovered that taking testosterone left him with an incipient receding hairline. Besides some trepidation about his sudden interest in watching hair transplant TV infomercials, Valerio welcomed this change as a potential cue for people to read him as male²⁸. Helen Boyd, who, as she put it, lost her husband to another woman when he became the other woman (her husband, a cross-dressing heterosexual man, decided to consider sex reassignment surgery and become a woman.) Boyd wrote in *She’s Not the Man I Married: My Life With a Transgender Husband*: “It is almost impossible for Betty to present as a feminine male because her femininity means that she [husband] is often read as a woman”²⁹. Valerio and Boyd use “read” differently, but they seem to agree that gender is a matter of interpretation, that gender is always a representation to be decoded. The reference to “reading” refers to Lacan’s elaborations on “writing,” a function he ascribed to the symptom when he called it “sinthome.”

Like Prosser, Hausman observed that the transsexual population is a well-read group for strategic reasons³⁰. To successfully obtain the medical treatments requested, the story of transsexuality has to match an officially sanctioned etiology. Indeed, the account has to be convincing: The very telling of the “right” story can confer legitimacy to the request for a sex change and grant access to hormones treatments and surgical interventions. Therefore the autobiographical reports delivered to the clinical experts have to conform to the constraints of a genre. Hence, published or unpublished transsexual autobiographers will follow the formal constraints of the genre quite systematically. Of course this will impose limits to the construction of transsexual subjectivity. Sandy Stone writes that the installation of an “official transsexual history” needed to obtain

²⁸ Max Wolf Valerio, *The Testosterone Files: My Hormonal and Social Transformation from Female to Male*, Emeryville: Seal Press, 2006, p. 324.

²⁹ Helen Boyd, *She’s Not the Man I Married: My Life With a Transgender Husband*, Emeryville: Seal Press, 2007, p. 85.

³⁰ Bernice L. Hausman, *Changing Sex: Transsexualism, Technology, and the Idea of Gender*, Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1995, p. 143.

access to surgical and hormonal sex change treatment has produced a situation in which the potential for the “intertextuality”³¹ of transsexual subjectivity is erased because the person requesting a sex change goes great lengths to appear as a “normal” transsexual. The “authentic experience is replaced by a particular kind of story, one that supports the old constructed positions.”³² A transsexual who suppresses the ambiguities and complexities of lived experience for the sake of normality is thus not very different from the patient who comes to see an analyst because the plausible story no longer efficiently lies about the past; in both cases, a symptom is endowed with the potential to start the analytic process. Yet, even when the transsexual narrative repeats the old clichés, one cannot downplay the tremendous impact that the encounter with a sex change memoir has had for many transsexuals. Almost all the sex change memoirs include a moment in which the author recounts reading another sex-change memoir. Often revelatory, the discovery of this type of text proves to be a defining moment anchoring the subject in the realization of an identity and often has creative and transformative functions. Memoirs of sex change are not only numerous but also often have an impressive, life-transforming effect on the future transsexuals who happen to read them—the experience of reading other people’s memoirs becomes a turning point in their evolution. Those who read them before starting their process of metamorphosis tell us that encounter with the text is a completely transformative experience that reveals a truth up to then unknown, but that once acknowledged, starts a process that is unstoppable.

In 2005, Jonathan Ames published a well-received anthology of transsexual memoirs. Ames aptly summed up the structure of sex change autobiographies as a three-act saga: “first act: gender-dysphoria childhood; second act: the move

³¹ Sandy Stone, “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto” in Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (eds.), *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, New York & London: Routledge, 1991. “Intertextuality” is a term introduced by Julia Kristeva in the late 1960’s. In this context it would refer to the multiple meanings of texts. For Kristeva, text is not a closed off entity but the result of an author’s borrowing and transformation of prior texts as well as of the reader’s attribution of meaning, which concerns not just the text in question but a network of texts invoked by the reader in the reading process. See Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1980.

³² Stone, “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto”, p. 295.

to the big city and the transformation ... [third act] the sex change”³³. For Ames, there is one basic outline for all transsexual memoirs: “A boy or a girl very early on in life feels terribly uncomfortable in his or her gender role, and there is a sense that some terrible mistake has occurred, that he or she was meant to be the other sex”³⁴. Ames takes transsexual autobiographies as *Bildungsroman* or “coming-of-age-novel”³⁵. Ames observes that transsexual memoirs follow a progression in which the main characters, now aware of the “error of nature,” see family and society as trying to reform them. Often, the protagonists also struggle internally, taking great pains in trying to repress their drive to become the opposite sex. Eventually, our heroes leave their hometown and venture into the outside world, and they often end up in a big city. It is in this new context that they begin to masquerade as the other sex, perhaps only privately and eventually more publicly. With time, the disguise and perfected ability to pass become more and more permanent and successful, particularly in the second part of the 20th century with the increased availability of hormone treatments and surgical technologies to manipulate the body. Ablations and implants as well as the climactic sex reassignment surgery will finally allow the memoir’s protagonist to reclaim a place of self-acceptance and peace. Ames emphasizes the literary and sociological significance of these memoirs; their appeal should be universal insofar as they deal with questions that haunt everyone, such as “Who am I?” and “What am I?”

Ames’ description of transsexual memoirs as *Bildungsroman* or a novel of formation is slightly misleading since transsexual memoirs could be described more accurately as novels of the artist, in a subgenre known as the *Künstlerroman*. There may not be such a huge difference between the two genres but this nuance is important for psychoanalytically influenced ears. On the one hand, one would have a formation (*Bildung*) of the unconscious, which means that unconscious phenomena are made visible in transsexual symptoms, while on the other hand one would come closer to art, hence to Lacan’s analysis of Joyce when he presents his writing, his art as a *sinthome*.

³³ Jonathan Ames, (ed.) *Sexual Metamorphosis: An Anthology of Transsexual Memoirs*, New York: Vintage Books, 2005, (p. xii).

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xxi.

Following the path of pathological “formations” of the unconscious, Catherine Millot³⁶ and Moustapha Safouan³⁷ have claimed that the conviction with which many transsexuals assert that they were born in the body of the wrong sex, makes them conclude that all transsexuals share a psychotic structure. Millot was the first to introduce the idea that the transsexual symptom could have a function structurally analogous to that which Lacan ascribed to writing when he took Joyce as an example. I disagree with their position in terms of diagnosis. In my practice, I found evidence that not all transsexuals are psychotic. In the same manner that Joyce was not psychotic, even if he was almost caught in a psychotic structure, especially in regards to what concerned his daughter. I recommend prudence when diagnosing transsexuals. I argue for a depathologization of transgenderism and thus take distance from the current pathological approach that psychoanalysis takes toward transgenderism. In my clinical practice I prefer to talk about transsexual symptoms and they may appear in several psychic structures, neurosis, perversion, psychosis.

One first consequence of Lacan’s theory of the *sinthome* is that it depathologizes transgenderism. If transgenderism is not an illness, a sex change cannot be either a treatment or a cure. We should in the name of the *sinthome* stop the systematic pathologization of the whole spectrum of transgender issues.

The second contribution that is brought about by the concept of *sinthome* concerns identification and identity. We should go beyond the model of imaginary identification (Lacan’s Mirror Stage) to understand sex changes³⁸. Most commen-

³⁶ Catherine Millot, *Horsexe: Essay on Transsexuality*, trans. Kenneth Hylton, New York: Autonomedia, 1989.

³⁷ Moustapha Safouan, *Études sur l’Édipe: introduction à une théorie du sujet*, Paris: Seuil, 1974.

³⁸ The Mirror Stage refers to the dual relationship humans have with their own body image as illustrated by their mirror reflection. The visual identity the mirror grants also supplies an imaginary sense of “wholeness” that is in contradiction with the bodily sensations of fragmentation. Although primarily imaginary, the Mirror Stage has also a significant symbolic dimension. The Symbolic is there when the infant recognizes herself in the mirror and supposes with great jubilation that her image is her own, and looks back to the adult holding the infant (who stands in for the big Other) looking for the approving gaze that will confirm this image unifying the fragmented Real. See also Lacan’s paper, “The Mirror Stage as formative of the function of the *I* as revealed in psychoanalytic experience”, in *Écrits*.

tators tend to stop at this point. This is the case of an author as gifted as Prosser. The Mirror Stage, Lacan hypothesized, is a stage that infants pass through in which the external image of the body (reflected in a mirror or represented by the loving gaze of the main caregiver, often the mother) is internalized as a unified body. This image, which will become the “I,” is an idealized imago and will be the blueprint for emerging perceptions of selfhood. It anticipates a bodily perception of unity that does not correspond with the infant’s real neurological immaturity and vulnerability. It also creates an ideal of perfection that the subject will always strive to achieve. Here we can see how the Ego is dependent on an external object with which the infant identifies, how it is produced in alienation, that is, as other, as an illusion of reciprocity and a promise of wholeness, when the real experience of the body is fragmented because at this early stage the infant cannot even control its bodily movements. In the Mirror Stage the subject becomes an I in anticipation and alienated from itself. The dual relation of the body to the Ego, which is on the basis of the body image hypothesized, was quite different in the case of Joyce and it did not involve identification with an image but with writing. His Ego was supported by his art.

When Lacan turned his attention to Joyce’s art, he also discovered a new relation to the body. He observed that Joyce had a peculiar body, one that could fall, slip away, like an open envelope letting go of its contents. Lacan focused on a passage of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, when Stephen remembers a moment of rage at his schoolmates that suddenly faded away: He had felt his anger falling from him “as easily as a fruit is divested of its soft ripe peel”³⁹. For Lacan, such a transformation of anger was curious and revealing. It could be generalized as encompassing a Joycean body, a body that could fall from one’s self, like a wrapping that does not fully hold⁴⁰. In Joyce’s case, it was writing that would “hold” the body.

The image of the body as a vacant shell, as an enclosure oppressing the self, is a recurrent theme in sex change autobiographical narratives. Raymond Thompson, a female-to-male transsexual, poignantly describes this experience of the body as an ill-adjusted container:

³⁹ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, New York: Penguin, 1992, p. 87.

⁴⁰ Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire; Livre XXIII: Le Sinthome 1975–1976*, Paris: Seuil, 2005, p. 149.

I needed to be out of my body, to be free. It felt as if my “inner body” was forcing itself to the ends of my limbs. I was growing ever larger inside of me, making me feel I was bursting at the seams and wanting out...out...out!

Because this was impossible, this process would abruptly reverse and I would start to shrink inside myself. My whole inner body shrank until I became very small inside. It was as I became so small I had to find some safe place to hide inside myself. My tiny inner body was in unfamiliar surroundings, in a place it didn't belong and I felt utterly unsafe. I became like a little shadow inside my physical body, a shadow running around everywhere trying to find somewhere inside.⁴¹

The sex change appears as the only possible escape from the confines of excessive *jouissance*: “I was trapped inside a living chamber of horrors”⁴². Lewins expanded this notion: “In the case of transsexuals locked inside a prison of flesh and blood, there is a constant ache for emancipation”⁴³. The body is experienced as a burdensome exterior layer often worn like an ill-fitting piece of clothing one is impatient to shed. This is how Leslie Feinberg describes it: “I think how nice it would be to unzip my body from forehead to navel and go on vacation. But there is no escaping it, I would have to pack myself along”⁴⁴. Jan Morris reiterates a similar wish when she writes: “All I wanted was liberation, or reconciliation—to live as myself, to clothe myself in a more proper body, and achieve Identity at last.”⁴⁵ Morris refers to her former body as an oppressive outer layer in which the real being, the true self, was locked; the urge to break free from it is pressing: “If I were trapped in that cage again nothing would keep me from my goal.”⁴⁶

⁴¹ Raymond Thompson *What Took You So Long? A Girl's Journey to Manhood*, New York: Penguin, 1995, p. 200.

⁴² Claudine Griggs, *S/HE: Changing Sex and Changing Clothes (Dress, Body, Culture)*, Oxford & New York: Berg, 1998, p. 88.

⁴³ Frank Lewins, *Transsexualism in Transsexuals*, Melbourne: Macmillan, 1995, p. 14.

⁴⁴ Diane Leslie Feinberg, *Journal of a Transsexual*, New York: World View Publishers, 1980, p. 20.

⁴⁵ Jan Morris, *Conundrum: From James to Jan – An Extraordinary Personal Narrative of Transsexualism*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974, p. 104.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

Taking into account the complex relationship that transsexuals have to their body I claim that an art similar to that of actual artists, if not necessarily with the genius of Joyce, can be found in transsexual artificiality. A transsexual who has been able to complete a true transition would have become an “Ego scription” as Ezra Pound said in his *Cantos*⁴⁷.

Thus, the third advantage of the use of the notion of *sinthome* concerns the manner in which a material bodily transformation is not enough to change the body image. As we have seen, the body is basically fragmented and only sustained in a precarious sense of unity by imaginary relations. For Lacan, “the body, at least in the analytic perspective, is the body in so far as it creates an orifice ..., that by which it is knotted to some Symbolic or Real.”⁴⁸ For psychoanalysis the body is a speaking body linked with culture and a specific imaginary realm. The body is sexual and to inhabit we assume a sexual positioning; this is not an easy task because the body is marked by the conundrum of sexual difference which is neither sex nor gender. One of the truths the transgender phenomenon illustrates is that body and gender coherence is a fiction that is assumed through identification. It is absurd to ascribe to anatomy the role of normalizer in a type of sexuality by focusing on the genitals or on a single prescribed act. This normalizing role has been challenged by transsexual discourse and practices. Sexual identity issues all revolve around this particular body, a body one is not born into but one that one becomes. But this identification with an image, which is like all forms of recognition a misrecognition, is not sufficient, it needs some kind of writing to anchor each subject to their body. Many people who feel trapped in a body of the “wrong” gender do experience the drive to write, to produce a text that narrates their experience, offering a testimony to their stories of transformation. It is in the writing of the sex change memoir that a different sort of bodily transformation takes place, when the body is written. Writing a sex change memoir aims not just at passing from one side to the other; it has the function to tying together body and text. Writing grants a different form of embodiment in which the body finds its anchor in the sea of language. In the case of sex-change memoirs, I argue that writing of the memoir can bring the author home to the body transformed.

⁴⁷ Ezra Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*, New Directions, 1996.

⁴⁸ “Le séminaire de Jacques Lacan: R.S.I.”, session of May 13 1975 (unpublished).

It is obvious that there are unavoidable tensions in transsexual autobiographies. If the aim of the autobiography is to document the transition, for instance, to show how somebody born a man becomes a woman, the purpose of the transsexual's memoir is in contradiction with the common transsexual's claim that: "I was woman all along, but happened to be in the wrong body." Prosser contends that this tension between transformation and continuity in the self is inherent to the autobiographical genre⁴⁹. However, often the motivation for the transition is to accomplish a sex change that will not leave vestiges of the former sex on the body. If the transsexual wants a complete transformation to pass as a member of the new sex, the autobiography defeats this purpose. By making public the account of the steps of the transition, very often documented with photographs, the autobiography somehow exposes the decoy. And yet, by publishing the account, the transsexual who does not want to be read as a transsexual but rather wants to pass as normal will become publicly recognized as a transsexual. Prosser emphasizes this paradox and highlights the fact that while there may be sex changes accomplished by surgery and hormones, the somatic transformation is not sufficient. Writing autobiographies of sex change generates transitional moments that are "more in keeping with the flow of the story to cohere the transsexual subject." In this case, indeed, the narrative "enacts its own transitions"⁵⁰. It is therefore this last stage of the transition, that is the narrative transition itself that I want to emphasize. It is a transition that takes places in and through writing, at a moment when the autobiography seems to recapture the body, thus anchoring it through a textual embodiment. This writing has the function of nomination. Let us take again the example of Jan Morris' autobiography *Conundrum*. Of her previous life as James, Jan explains: "I was a writer. Full as I was of more recondite certainties, I have always been sure of that too. I never for a moment doubted my vocation"⁵¹. In writing about her writing, Morris describes her style as if it was already revealing an essential, traditional femininity, "the quick emotionalism, the hovering tear, the heart-on-sleeve, the touch of schmaltz"⁵². Or again: "I often detected in myself a taste for the flamboyant ... often a compensation for uncertainty"⁵³. Feeling that s/he has been a writer since early childhood, Morris

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⁴⁹ Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, p. 119.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

⁵¹ Morris, *Conundrum*, p. 67.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 133.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

condenses this posture in a hedonist mode: “Creating to please my senses was certainly my own literary method.”⁵⁴

More deeply though, writing had been an attempt to make body and spirit cohere, less to please her senses than as an effort to find a strategy capable of regulating excess *jouissance*. This was achieved by way of an artifice, of a supplement (in the same way, there was the sex change but also writing about it) that allowed for an incarnation of what before had only been experienced in the Real. This Real corresponds to what is enacted in mystical phenomena or realized in psychosis: It is founded on the impossibility of sexual equivalence or rapport, which was at root the “sexual incongruity” experienced by Morris. Prosser talks about “transsexual mirror stages”⁵⁵ and quotes Morris’s mirror scene in *Conundrum*, minutes before going to the operating room for a sex change in Morocco. Already anaesthetized, pubic hair shaven and disinfected, Morris staggers while going “to say good bye to myself in the mirror. We would never meet again, and I wanted to give the other self a long last look in the eye, and a wink for luck.” The person who writes will emerge “alive and well, and sex-changed in Casablanca. ... I had a new body”⁵⁶. This scene is not only a transitional moment in Morris’s transsexual trajectory but also the most crucial point in the transsexual narrative. As Prosser comments, this is when the “me” written about in the biography and the “I” that writes become one; they had been “so far separated by sex” and now are “fused into a singly sexed autobiographical subject, an integral ‘I’”⁵⁷. Here is the place where I see the function of Lacan’s Ego as sriptor.

It is indeed the writing of the memoir that allowed Morris to “embody” her body. It was not enough to undergo the sex reassignment surgery to reknit the Imaginary, the Real and the Symbolic. The key to why Morris woke up ecstatic from the surgery despite the sharp pain: “I found myself, in fact, astonishingly happy”⁵⁸ is to be found in the comment of the Moroccan surgeon who performed her sex change. During the postoperative examination, Dr. B. commented in a mix of French and heavily accented broken English, nicely rendered in

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁵⁵ Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, p. 101.

⁵⁶ Morris, *Conundrum*, pp. 140–141.

⁵⁷ Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, p. 100.

⁵⁸ Morris, *Conundrum*, p. 140.

Morris's transcription: "*Très, très bon*, you could nevaair get surgery like this in England—you see, now you would be able to *write*."⁵⁹ Now being "able to write," Jan Morris wrote and constructed with *Conundrum* a text that gives credibility to her being a woman. Thus, the memoir comes full circle. It opens with "I was three years old when I realized that I have been born in the wrong body and should really be a girl. I remember the moment well, it is the earliest memory of my life."⁶⁰ Since "it is only in writing this book that I have delved so deeply into my emotions"⁶¹, it was also through writing that Morris completed the evolution toward a solution to the conundrum of her existence. The book closes with:

if I stand back and look at myself dispassionately, as I looked at myself that night in the mirror in Casablanca—If I consider my story in detachment I sometimes seem, a figure of a fable or allegory. ... I see myself not as a man or woman, self or other, fragment or whole, but only as a wondering child with the cat beneath the Bluthner [piano].⁶²

This is the vignette with which the autobiography begins and ends. It keeps acquiring new meaning through writing. The letter may be the same, but it reads differently. Morris, now Jan, has acquired *savoir faire*, know-how. Finally a One of body and soul has been achieved through Morris's singular *sinthomatic* identification, and it testifies to the power of transformation contained in writing.

Sex change memoirs are meant to be read, to be interpreted. They beg for deciphering. They are as often symptoms as *sinthomes*. Does this mean that they are great literature? Perhaps not, at least not always, but they all aspire to the most essential function of literature. They are love letters to others or to oneself that somehow inscribe sexual difference. Writing a sex change memoir aims not just at passing from one side to the other.

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In some cases, writing about one's transsexual transformation is of the order of the *sinthome*; there are many cases when the transformation achieved a re-knotting of the three registers of the real, symbolic, and imaginary. Then, the

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 142; italics in the original.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 174.

sinthome shapes the singularity of an “art,” a *techne* that reknotted a workable consistency for the subject; this movement can best be evoked by saying that it moves the subject from a certain contingency to absolute necessity. Thus, Morris describes her trajectory as inevitable, predestined, as if the sex change had always been bound to happen:

I do not for a moment regret the act of change. I could see no other way, and it has made me happy. ... Sex has its reasons too, but I suspect the only transsexuals who can achieve happiness are those ... to whom it is not primarily a sexual dilemma at all—who offer no rational purpose to their compulsions, even to themselves, but are simply driven blindly and helplessly. ... We are the most resolute. Nothing will stop us, no fear of ridicule or poverty, no threat of isolation, not even the prospect of death itself.⁶³

One can see why her *sinthome* was necessary: It was necessity itself. A *sinthome* is what does not cease to be written. In Morris’ case, the *sinthome* has produced less a “woman” than a “woman of letters.”

Sexual difference is neither just the body (as biological substrata) nor the psychic introjections of the social performance of gender (a socially constructed role). Neither the perspective of biological essentialism nor that of social constructivism have been able to solve the problem of unconscious sexual difference. Since sexual difference is neither sex nor gender, sex needs to be symbolized, and gender needs to be embodied.

I will reiterate my claim that sex change memoirs are a narrative form with a specific function for the subjectivity of their authors. In some cases, transsexual memoirs can function as a process of self-invention for their authors. Moreover, sex change memoirs provide an excellent testing ground for Lacan’s theory of the *sinthome* as art. Even though we know that the psychoanalytic perspective on sexual difference implies that it is not a question of anatomy but rather of its consequences, we have noted that a majority of transsexuals struggle to conform rigidly to the normative demands of a sexual identity in contradiction with their anatomical sex. While they engage in technologically

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 168–169.

assisted manipulations of their bodies, their torment seems to be the result of the limits imposed by an anatomy experienced as a tragic destiny.

Let us take now the example of the book by Mario Martino, *Emergence*, which the jacket copy advertised as “the only complete autobiography of a woman who has become a man.” This book is presented as the account of a “painful life to live, a painful life to write”⁶⁴. Martino, a nurse, played the dual role of subject of study and clinical authority using psychoanalytic jargon, which generates some humorous self-awareness. Evoking his contempt for the father’s repressive violence and his adoration for the mother, Martino comments: “A bit of Oedipus, you think?”⁶⁵. Martino describes a second phalloplasty that seemed to fail as the first one did and the neopenis had to be surgically excised. As the tip of his new penis became black, rotted away, and necrotized, he had to sit in water every night to slowly cut away dead tissue. He comments ironically: “Talk about castration complex! Psychologically this cutting was almost impossible for me, yet it has to be done.”⁶⁶ Mario broke away from the increasing distress about the inadequate results of surgery when he came to the realization that even if he wanted “a perfect phallus” he had to accept the impossibility of the wish. “So today I’m happy with what I have: a respectable phallus—three fourths perfect.”⁶⁷

The idea of imperfection is also mentioned by Renée Richards. She was asked at age 72 about the motivations for her sex change more than 30 years before. By a striking coincidence, Richards described her decision to change sex as resulting from an unyielding “pressure to change into a woman.” This cannot but evoke Lacan’s expression *pousse-à-la-femme* of push-towards-Woman used to refer to the feminization most often observed in psychosis but considered a generalized phenomenon common to several psychic structures.⁶⁸

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Richards also said that she wished she could have something that could have stopped that “pressure” and prevented the surgery: “What I said was if there

⁶⁴ Mario Martino, *Emergence: A Transsexual Autobiography*, New York: Crown Publishers, 1977, p. xi.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 262.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

⁶⁸ See Jacques Lacan, “L’étourdit” in *Autres écrits*, Paris: Seuil, 2001.

were a drug, some voodoo, any kind of mind-altering magic remedy to keep the man intact, that would have been preferable, but there wasn't"⁶⁹. By then, she seemed to have regrets about something that she had felt earlier as inevitable: "Better to be an intact man functioning with 100 percent capacity for everything than to be a transsexual woman who is an imperfect woman."⁷⁰

The notion of an "imperfect" solution relates to the etymology of the word "symptom." As we have seen, up to the late 14th century the spelling of word was *sinthoma*. This is very close to its Greek predecessor *symptoma*, which means "a happening, accident, disease". Its stem is *sympiptein* (to befall) which is combination of *syn* (together) and *piptein* (to fall.) In Greek, "symptom" literally means "falling together". The word "fall" is cognate to the word "fail". "Fail" comes from the old French *falir*, now *faillir*, "to be lacking, to miss, not succeed," from the Latin *fallere*, "to trip, cause to fall". Figuratively, "to deceive, trick, dupe, cheat, elude; fail, be lacking or defective". The noun (as in "without fail") is from late 13th century, from the old French *faile*, "deficiency," derived from *falir*. The Anglo-French form of the verb *failer*, came to be used as a noun, hence "failure".

This detour by way of etymology sketches a movement from failure to symptom. To quote Samuel Beckett, I would say that the *sinthome* is the art of failing better; it consists of letting the symptom fall (*falling together*) which is precisely the art proposed by the Lacanian notion of *sinthome*—failing together with one's unconscious, thus, as Beckett would say, "failing better". It was that or death, as it was poignantly affirmed by several analysands. They all had a possibility of letting their bodies fall, like Stephen Dedalus, who, for Lacan, indicated Joyce's main symptom. If Stephen is, in Joyce's various schemes and tables of correspondences for *Ulysses*, a man without a body, it is because his body could not "hold him together" without the artifice of writing. As one of my analysands said, "I can right/write myself through writing". For these analysands, the *sinthome* will be mandatory as it were, a necessity that nevertheless also carries along a little defect.

⁶⁹ *New York Times*, February 1, 2007.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

I want to conclude by equating art in general and the *sinthome* as the “art of failing better”. The idea of failure has been explored with precision in literary criticism⁷¹; Walter Benjamin’s observations are worth mention: “To do justice to the figure of Kafka in its purity and its peculiar beauty one must never lose sight of one thing: it is the purity and beauty of a failure. The circumstances are manifold. One is tempted to say: one he was certain of eventual failure, everything worked out for him en route as in a dream.”⁷² Benjamin’s comment evokes Beckett’s description of modern aesthetics in terms of “fidelity to failure”: “to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail.” Benjamin’s “beauty of failure” is a striking figure that marks a disjunction comparable to the disjunction presented by Lacan between truth and knowledge, the privation of truth, our love for knowledge facing the unrelenting acknowledgement that we are trapped in our passion for ignorance. I would like to suggest that the *sinthome* should be taken as a new way of organizing *jouissance*, but via failure, that is, it would be a way of failing better that would “allow one to live”. The art of failing, but better, better again.

⁷¹ For a detailed analysis of art as failure see Ewa Ziarek’s excellent book *The Rhetoric of Failure: Deconstruction of Skepticism, Reinvention of Modernism*, New York: SUNY Press, 1995.

⁷² Walter Benjamin, “Franz Kafka On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, pp 111–140, here p. 117 and “Some Reflections on Kafka” *op. cit.*, p. 146.