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Cover Page Footnote

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Signifiers Still Matter: The relevance of ‘On an ex post Facto Syllabary’ for Therapy Today

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Given the plethora of mental health treatments available today, what makes Lacanian psychoanalysis still an excellent option? One answer can be found in the role of the signifier for the unconscious. To highlight this, we turn to a little-known Lacanian essay entitled “On an ex Post Facto Syllabary” (2006/1966), which from here on I’ll refer to as *Syllabary*. In the English version of *Écrits* (2006/1966), *Syllabary* is eight pages and granted stand-alone essay status, but in the original French, “D’un Syllabaire Après Coup” follows right below,

without a page break, “In Memory of Ernest Jones: On his Theory of Symbolism”. Lacan wrote *Syllabary* as an addendum, a postscript to his essay on Jones, a rather longwinded P.S., the footnote readers might have expected alongside Herbert Silberer’s name in the “In Memory” essay.¹ Seven years after writing “In Memory”, Lacan filled out what he saw as an ellipsis, deeming *Syllabary*’s contents important enough to write, and indeed, I think this short, little known text holds a key to what is radical and still most important regarding what makes psychoanalysis relevant today, and that is the role of the signifier and the

1 The translation’s “ex post facto” refers to retrospective action or force, which highlights Lacan’s retrospection on the essay’s topic. *Syllabary*’s eight pages were added seven years after the completion of the previous text. It is the only addition to a specific text in the entire *Écrits* collection—the other additions, such as “Overture” and “Antecedents,” punctuate the *Écrits* as introductory and biographical notes, respectively. Thus *Syllabary* is *après coup*, “after the event” of the initial essay. The *après coup*, of the French title (“D’un syllabaire après coup”), can also be translated as deferred action. Bruce Fink’s translator’s endnote mentions *après coup* is used to translate *Nachträglichkeit*, the idea of retroactive understanding manifested following further events. These further events might be Lacan’s work on psychoanalysis’ relationship to science; when writing *Syllabary*, Lacan was thinking about this topic. In December of 1965, with “La science et la vérité,” he juxtaposes both Freud and Jung’s relationship to science, and linguistics versus psychology. It is also likely a reference to the work done via association after the dream, work that allows for retrospective understanding. As for *syllabary*, it is a writing system that consists of syllables instead of a symbol letter. So one symbol can be the syllable “he”. Ethisop has a *syllabary*.

symbolic in mental health treatment.

So first, who was Herbert Silberer, the author Lacan specifically discusses in *Syllabary*? The little-known Austrian psychoanalyst wrote on symbolism, dreams, imagery, introversion, mysticism, alchemy, yoga, and Freud. Silberer's works include *Problems of Mysticism and its Symbolism* (1914) which was later published as *Hidden Symbolism of Alchemy and the Occult Arts* (1971), and *The Dream: Introduction to the Psychology of Dreams* (1918/1955). Of course, the 'Syllabary' (*Syllabaire* in French) in the title is a word play on the phonemes of Silberer's name. And thus in the essay's title, Lacan draws attention to the power of paying attention to the phonemes or syllables that make up signifiers.

In *Syllabary*, Lacan specifically dissects Silberer's concept of the 'functional phenomenon' that occurs in dreams, a concept that Carl Jung championed (Jung and Silberer acknowledged a mutual intellectual debt to each other and Jones and Lacan sometimes refer to the Jung-Silberer school). Freud integrated functional phenomena into his 1914 edition of the *Traumdeutung*.² Lacan takes up functional phenomenon in order to clarify the role of the signifier in both dream formation and interpretation.

What is the Functional Phenomenon?

Silberer described three classes of symbolization phenomena: 1) the material phenomena (where a dream's visual images represent or symbolize the dreamer's thought content that is being dealt with: an object of thought), 2) the functional phenomena (where the dream's visual images represent or symbolize the dreamer's subjective states—a symbolization of how the mind is functioning), and 3) the somatic phenomena (where a dream's visual images represent or symbolize the dreamer's bodily states). In *Syllabary*, Lacan focuses on the second, Silberer's functional

phenomenon, which represents what is going on in the psyche of the dreamer as she dreams.

Lacan agrees with Silberer that functional phenomena do actually exist in reality and says a good illustration of what constitutes functional phenomenon is to be found in Silberer's 'symbolism of the threshold' aka 'threshold symbolism'. The psychic states symbolized in threshold symbolism include the transition stages of falling asleep and waking. To illustrate, Silberer (1918) presents examples of common images during these transitory states including the following:

I was on the point of departing from the waking state. The following image appeared to me: I am putting on my coat as if preparing to go out with another person who comes to call for me. The sleep appears here as a person who comes to call for me. (p. 368)

Recently, I awoke from a dream just as I was watching an image of a friend board a train that left the station. One can certainly, following the functional phenomenon idea, interpret such symbolism in terms of what was going on in my psychic functioning, as a transition from a sleeping to waking state. Indeed, I awoke as I watched the train pull out [and yes, make of that what you will on the multiple staves of the score]. But this symbol of the train does not *necessarily* mean a crossing from one state to another [nor what else you're thinking]. It could also refer to the saying "the train has left the station," that means the opportunity has already passed, that a process has already begun and there is no point in resisting, or the act has been done, akin to the saying "that ship has sailed." However, to best glean the unconscious formations at work in the symbolism of the train leaving the station, one must pay attention to how the arrangement and variations of signifiers create independent meaning effects. One needs *the*

2 Freud (1914) said Silberer's concept of the functional phenomenon was "one of the few indisputably valuable additions to the theory of dreams" (p. 97).

dreamer herself to specifically associate to the signifiers in relation to other signifiers, in order to glean the unconscious at work, rather than assume it represented a particular saying, transitional state, or ‘natural’ hidden meaning. Lacan argues along with Freud that the focus must lie on the associations of the dreamer not the analyst or another interpreter [nor mysticism, archetypes, or theology for example, which I’ll get to in a moment]. This is a difference in the level of the work, a level related to staying close to the letter, which is an important difference that Lacan argues Silberer failed to grasp and demarcate.

In *Syllabary*, Lacan both dissects Silberer’s concepts of functional and threshold symbolism, and juxtaposes them with his own language-based understanding of dream symbolism, which he argues is found in Freud. Lacan had already made this argument in various forms many times prior in his seminars and writings. In 1957, discussing linguistic analysis in relation to dreams, Lacan said “dream images are to be taken up only on the basis of their value as signifiers” and in the dream “we are dealing with writing” (p. 424). In exploring the unconscious meanings of dreams, as with symptoms, fantasies, parapraxes, and jokes, Lacan is most interested in the “constitutive role of the signifier” (p. 426). He investigates what we do with *syllables*, the phonemes, the small literal components of language, and their relations to the functions and productions of the unconscious, such as, but not limited to, our dreams. Lacan emphasizes how symbolism in dreams, like symptoms and all unconscious formations, must be understood as (phonematic) signifying material. Bruce Fink (2004) describes how signifiers are the “motor force behind [dreams]. An image of a man standing under a line may have nothing to do with the idea of being below a certain standard, but everything to do with ‘understanding’” (p. 98). A key component of what makes Lacanian method unique is this

insistence that the letters, the phonemes, *matter*. Think of an analysand recalling a dream in which there is a river. One way of viewing the symbolism would be to focus on the hidden meaning of the proverbial and stereotypical ‘river of life’ symbol, as used in theology and over the course of human history, across time and cultures, utilizing conscious processes. Or one could listen for and highlight what Lacan (2006) calls the “signifierness of dreams” (p. 424). By encouraging associations, the analysand may associate to a host of signifiers. River could have (hypothetically) been the name of the neighbor’s dog, perhaps a dog that the neighbor would violently kick when angry as the analysand watched on in horror as a child. Or perhaps someone named Rivka plays a particular role in the client’s life, and thus the Riv syllable plays a dominant role. Perhaps something happened when Rivka was giving a talk. The point being, paying attention to the phonemic form will bring forth more particular unconscious material that we cannot know ahead of time (based on a saying or archetype). Indeed, the *ex post facto* in the title also points to the retroactive action and force, the deferred action of sorting out the syllabary at work in analysand’s dream life that is not dependent on a prior preexisting lexicon of images.

What the Jung-Silberer School Failed to Grasp

The other main point that Lacan (2006) argues in *Syllabary* is that when Silberer fails to grasp the “signifierness of dreams, at the crux” (p. 424) of Freud’s dream theory, it is because of a lack of theoretical tools that would be necessary for such an understanding. In particular, the three theorists Lacan takes up in *Syllabary* (Silberer, Jones, and Jung) don’t have Lacan’s valuable and useful theoretical apparatus of the RSI registers (the realms of the real, symbolic, and imaginary) to make the proper arguments and come

to the most helpful conclusions for theory and technique.

Employing his RSI categories, Lacan argues that functional phenomena are actually imaginary phenomena, fall under the imaginary realm, and as such are not a proper formation of the unconscious. Yet we fall prey and are “seduced” into treating functional phenomena as such.

Lacan says the functional phenomenon is seductive because a) the imaginary realm is seductive which his oeuvre lays out from the mirror stage onwards, and b) situated in the imaginary realm it also harkens back to a pre-psychoanalytic psychology. Lacan warns we must be wary of its seduction just as we must be wary of *all* tendencies to relinquish the import of the signifier while veering back towards the imaginary. We keep getting seduced back into the imaginary realm, to the image, identification, ego, and narcissistic identification with the ego’s image. Additionally, in the imaginary we tend to fall back on a search for hidden meanings, on the signified over the signifier. Lacan (2006) claims the principle of the “*primacy of the signifier over the signified*” (p. 391) is what differentiates Freud from Jung.

Lacan repeatedly states that the proper work of analysis, the transformative and ultimately ethical work of analysis, takes place *not* on the imaginary plane (not ego to ego) but on the symbolic plane, where the analyst’s desire is situated and where the most fruitful and liberating work takes place. The symbolic plane is where we work the most non-defensively.

With *Syllabary*, as with his other writings, Lacan wants to redirect, turn around a misdirected movement, especially when some of Freud’s and Lacan’s colleagues take dream symbolism and the work of analysis in the direction of the imaginary. According to Lacan, Jung over-generalizes and thus loses psychoanalytic specificity and relies too much on conscious processes.

The effect of the signifier and the automaticity of the signifying chain play out in all three RSI realms. Lacan recognizes psychology’s broader tendency to biologize or naturalize without recognizing the role of the signifier upon that biology. Lacan (2006) argues that to misrecognize this profound role of both image and signifier upon the body, to think of the body as a real or biological entity that can be divorced from image and signification, is a “delusion” (p. 608). When we are speaking of human behavior, and particularly in the realms that interest psychoanalysis, including dreams, and also aggressive and sexual behavior, we must recognize the profound role of image and signifier upon the real. The image and the signifier will always interact to affect our bodily drives—RSI intersect. In understanding how one suffers and how to work through that suffering, one must include the effects of RSI and the signifier. Lacan reminds us that post language instantiation, while all three registers of RSI are always simultaneously in play, the human being is never again the same as pre-language instantiation, however much we may wish it was. Thus, we are always particularly vulnerable to the lure and captivation of the imaginary, at the expense of the symbolic. Lacan argues in *Syllabary* that Jung and Silberer (the Jung-Silberer school) fall prey to this vulnerability. *Syllabary* is ultimately a critique of a Jungian approach, via an explicit detour of Silberer and Jones.

And *we are still vulnerable*; this is a battle psychoanalysis continues to fight, 50 years after Lacan wrote *Syllabary*. Some (even psychoanalytic) therapeutic approaches, by emphasizing consciousness, feelings, and archetypes that affect one *over and above the role of the signifier in formations of the unconscious*, as if they are natural, primary, and *not* affected by language, fall prey to the very traps and pitfalls Lacan criticizes in *Syllabary*.

Being open to the work of the signifier, and offering a method that follows the

formations of the unconscious using speech and language is still called for today. Especially now, with the proliferation of somatic therapies that profess to bypass speech and go straight to the workings of the nervous system as if we are not speaking beings. Also, very popular and accessible are self-help groups with a strong foundation in spiritual surrender, and popular life coaching strategies strongly based on Jungian archetypes. Alchemy is making a comeback. Based on the burgeoning proliferation of treatment offerings and social media trends regarding mental health, Jungian psychology, with its focus on the role of archetypal images and the realm of the imaginary, is having a resurgence. Just ask the much-discussed Jungian psychologist of the moment from the University of Toronto, Dr. Jordan Peterson's more than two million Youtube followers and readers. If you're wondering if Lacan's *Syllabary* argument has any relevance today, also notice how discourse around masculine/feminine polarities, divine feminine and masculine, and the psychology of the spirit (which Lacan also takes up in *Syllabary*) is reigning supreme in mental health treatment. Popular psychology books these days, like *The King, Warrior, Magician, Lover: Rediscovering the archetypes of the mature masculine*, have the Jung-Silberer school written all over them, so to speak. Robert Bly and Joseph Campbell are making a comeback. Would Lacan would be rolling in his grave? One could argue, when looking at the cultural landscape, at this moment in time, Jung is winning. It is not that these treatment modalities do not have a place in the realm of mental health; I believe they do. It is that we *also* need space for different modalities and a discourse around the potential pitfalls of such approaches, and Lacan's critiques and offerings hold true today as much as ever.

The specific details found in Lacan's *Syllabary* argument regarding his critique of functional and threshold phenomena remind

us that identification with the ego (of the subject or analyst) and staying on the level of the imaginary and consciousness is what we *still* want to avoid in psychoanalytic theory and technique. Rather, working at the level of language, with desire and the specificity of the signifier, on the symbolic plane, is at the heart of Lacanian psychoanalysis and is what makes it unique, then and now. While the concept of the functional phenomenon no longer has a vibrant role in analytic discussion (not that it ever really did, for in many ways it has always been relegated to an addendum), it is, however, a fine example of the resistance against the role of the signifier in our suffering, thriving, and treatment that remains present in the offerings of mental health approaches today. The point is that the resistance is still strong and the signifiers we use still matter.

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