Death Sentences: From Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* to the Sign's Last Sigh. An Exercise in (Mis)communication(s).

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ABSTRACT

The "object" of this paper is paradoxical. It attempts to show (communicate) how Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* may be read from a "Lacanian" point of view; how a number of "Lacanian" concepts can be useful to thematicize various levels of (mis)communication and (given the assumptions of the textual strategy employed), the inevitability of wider-ranging forms of (mis)understanding. It also suggests that the so-called interpretation of the object is just as much an allegory of the methodology: the subject-object binary tending to break down. This results in an ambivalent relation: is "Lacanian" criticism interpreting *The Moor*, or, is *The Moor* a parabolic form of Lacanian theory? This interpretive/theoretical dialectic is further problematized by the theoretical system's challenge to both the ontological certainty of the object of interpretation and the ontological stability and epistemological value of the interpretive scheme itself.

KEY WORDS: (mis)communication, epistemology, hermeneutics, Lacanian theory, *Salman Rushdie*, the sign.

1. (MIS)COMMUNICATING COMMUNICATIONS

"What do we mean by communication? The oldest meaning of the word, in English, can be summarized as the passing of ideas, information, and attitudes from person to person. But, later, communication came also to mean a line or channel from place to place". So begins Raymond Williams' study entitled, *Communications* (Williams, 1976:9). Although this highly generalized definition may still seem relevant to the 1990's the theoretical basis upon which this paper rests will render the model of communication as the transmission and reception of ideas highly problematic. This, to put the matter into the context of linguistics, is the result of what might be called the post-Saussurian revolution of the sign. Here, the language-referent model was challenged by the semiotic paradigm, which put the stress on language as a self-enclosed relational system; a change of emphasis which would send reverberations well...
beyond the specialized domain of linguistics - notably (and significantly for this essay) in the discourses of the human sciences, especially those of textual theory and psychoanalysis. The latter discourses, in their so-called post-structuralist forms, would not only come to challenge the transmission model but also contest the idea of definable unproblematical spaces. Thus, the theoretician who provides the interpretive dynamic "behind", or "in", this essay was able to rewrite Descartes cogito ergo sum as: "I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think" (Lacan, 1977:166).

2. REALITY, COMMUNICATION AND SUBJECTIVE SPACES: ERECTION AND CASTRATION

This questioning of subjective positioning has ontological, epistemological and hermeneutic consequences. Ontologically, definitions can no longer be caught within the fixed frame associated with positivistic forms of thinking (positivistic because positivism cannot be reduced to an unproblematic homogeneous discourse). The lack of a fixed centre from which to establish categorial definitions attacks the basis, not only of the dominant social sciences model of knowledge and communication, but also that of the idealist following in the Cartesian tradition: "I think, therefore I am" cannot be the starting-point, or a final (safe) refuge in the self, because the "self", according to the Lac(k)anian system (or the way in which it can be systematized) is a sign: i.e. the product of language. Language, part of what Lacan calls the "symbolic order", offers the positions of perceiving subject or perceived object which are constantly subject to alternation or change. (I write Lac(k)anian to indicate that my version of Lacan, for theoreticai and practical reasons, deficient - full of "lack".) If I feel empowered on the one hand by my position as subject, I can, on the other, just as easily be displaced or disempowered (symbolically castrated) by becoming the object of someone else's discourse. Although the (anti-)hero of the novel to be discussed is born with a terrific erection he will be subjected to thoroughgoing castration from this point of view. The subject, then, may feel empowered on the one hand or, on the other, "de-centred" - that is, ousted from a privileged place and consigned to the margins or to a place of insignificance or relative weakness.

Epistemologically, this renders knowledge about the self or the world highly indeterminate. Freud's ideas had split the subject by emphasizing the irrational, potentially destructive forces of the unconscious which required those working in the tradition of psychoanalysis to adopt a model of communication which took into account hidden latent possibilities; Lac(k)anian thought has further complicated the theoreticai landscape (to adopt a topographical metaphor) by requiring the critic to consider the self in terms of a semiotic system. As I shall try to show, this semiotic approach throws systems of human communication into utter disarray. In epistemological terms Lac(k)anian theory tends to question the reliability of claims to knowledge: communications do not serve to communicate easily decipherable messages, but to scramble them. Lac(k)anian critics, of course, seem to be in a privileged position - but even this, according to the consequences of the controlling concepts, is an illusion.

Hermeneutically, interpretive acts must always take into account that there is no way out of the symbolic system (and its uncertainties) which make the act of interpretation possible. Hence during the course of the paper I introduce a number of orthographic puns to remind the
reader of the gaps between the desire for understanding or closure (e.g. IDentity) and how the self is caught in the Other, or the alterity of language (e.g. allEGOry).§ There is no form of meta-commentary that can put the interpreter above the duplicitous nature of the sign, and hence the orthographical clues... I mean, clues. If Descartes ultimately fell back on the cogito argument, then the Lac(k)anian, like the deconstructionist, can only fall back on one certainty: that the nature of the sign is indeterminate - which (in terms of arriving at certainties) is not to concede the interpreting self (or the system of interpretation) very much. These uncertainties engendered by the Lac(k)anian system will be explored through a reading of Salman Rushdie's The Moor's Last Sigh. It might also be noted here that the novel is so full of possibilities for Lac(k)anian forms of analysis that this paper is a mere scratch on the surface.

3. DEATH SENTENCES

3.1. Salman Rushdie's The Moor's Last Sigh and the Lac(k)anian "spool" of crITicism. An allEGOry.

The main protagonist of Rushdie's novel, The Moor's Last Sigh, afflicted with a premature ageing disorder and a deformed right hand, is Moraes Zogoiby (called the "Moor") whose life is dominated by two women: his mother (Aurora) and a lover (Uma), significantly described by him as "the two great super-powers". These two "powers", he tells us, were thought to look alike, but, he continues, "I never saw it, couldn't see it at all" (Rushdie, 1996:3). These particulars seem tailor made for the classical Freudian critic whose interpretive strategies could hardly forbear linking these details to the Oedipal scenario (it is worth noting that his mother's name refers to the sunrise - so essential to life - and that his girl-friend's name includes a contraction of mother "ma"). The fact that Rushdie has the mother murdered in mysterious circumstances and the girlfriend die in a fake suicide attempt both tend to invite the simplicities of a "vulgar" Freudian reading - as does the detail that the Moor is born with an erection which impedes his passage into the world (and thus there is a literal erotic attachment to the mother). The deformed hand, though, can be read as a displaced symbol of castration at birth. These details indicate how suggestive this text is to a Freudian approach, but this paper will only concentrate on a number of features which may reflect on the thematics set out in the introductory paragraphs. These features, however, can be read with relation to the symbolic empowerments and disempowerments which will be important to the reading of The Moor's Last Sigh offered here.

However, back to the Lac(k)anian system and Moor's mother. The mother is described as an eminent twentieth-century painter who dominated cultural life in Bombay, and who was known for her portraits of her only son, the Moor. So it could be said that the Moor is represented through the mother's gaze which is fundamental to the way his IDentity emerges throughout the novel.¶ One of the ways this could be read is to see this from the point of view of the entry into what Lacan called the symbolic order, where the subject is forced to see itself through the signifying system: i.e., see itself from the position of the Other (i.e., through the linguistic, cultural (symbolic) systems which precede the subject's entry into them). Of course, this works both ways (we are all constructed in the discourse of the Other): if the Moor is represented, so can he be said to represent the representer because, as he says: "What then can

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the humble clay usefully say about the hands that moulded it? Perhaps simply this: that I was there. And that during the years of sittings I made a kind of portrait of her, too. She was looking at me, and I was looking right back” (The Moor’s Last Sigh (Rushdie, 1996:219)).

The two gazes are locked into the position set up by the symbolic order: at one level, subject and object (which is reversible here); at another level the positionings of mother and son, with the prohibitions which this relation entails. (Later I’ll suggest that a displaced form of incest brings about the rupture between mother and son.)

So from the very beginning it is possible to thematicize the events according to the Lac(k)anian symbolic register. Take the following paragraph which describes the mother:

“To be the offspring of our daemonic Aurora,” I was told when young by the Goan painter V. (for Vasco) Miranda, “is to be, truly, a modern Lucifer. You know: son of the blooming morning.” By then my family had moved to Bombay, and this was the kind of thing that passed, in the Paradise of Aurora Zogoiby’s legendary salon, for a compliment; but I remember it as a prophesy, because the day came when I was indeed hurled from that fabulous garden, and plunged towards Pandemonium. (Banished from the natural, what choice did I have but to embrace its opposite? Which is to say, unnahiralism, the only real ism of these back-to-front and jabberwocky days. Placed beyond the Pale, would you not seek to make light of the Dark? Just so. Moraes Zogoiby, expelled from his story, tumbled towards history.) (Rushdie, 1996:5)

It is significant that the Moor’s life with his mother and his later rejection is described in Christian terms. First he inhabits a paradise, “a fabulous garden”. This can be related to the Lac(k)anian pre-symbolic stage of undifferentiated being and plenitude. Continuing the Christian story the division from the mother is described as a fall into hell, which is a banishment from the natural - this could be read as referring to the division from the pre-linguistic world dominated by primal needs, or the Lac(k)anian pre-symbolic. With the division from the mother/paradise the Moor asks, “what choice did I have but to embrace its opposite?” That is, “unnaturalism”. The embracing of the opposite can be seen as an allegory of the subject’s entry into the symbolic order of differences - a kind of “unnatural” state which divides the subject from itself, its pre-symbolic “natural” condition. It may be noticed also that the Moor is now beyond “the Pale”, i.e. placed beyond a limit or boundary. Thus the protagonist, in being thrust from the mother, has crossed a limit from which there can be no return. Of course, he is a grown man when this occurs, and this is why I say it is like an allegory of the entry into the symbolic register.

This thematicization or allegorization can be brought out further with reference to the phrase which follows the word “unnaturalism” - “the only real ism of these back-to-front and jabberwocky days”. Here it might be noted that what is on the other side of the limit (i.e. beyond total union with the self and mother) is the “ism”: the suffix which points to “back-to-front and jabberwocky days”. The jabberwocky was, of course, a poem in Lewis Carroll’s Through the Looking Glass characterized by nonsense syllables and meaningless speech - a kind of poetic gibbesh. This can be related to what in Lac(k)anian theory is called the “unary” signer. This can be described as a sound which a young pre-symbolic child can produce but is meaningless (it’s a signer with no signified). However, once the child begins
to distinguish between things, sounds are no longer forms of meaningless gibber but parts of a symbolic code. Once a child can distinguish between only two things verbally, this is a pivotal event: the child has a binary pair of signifiers and the entry into the symbolic order of language has begun.

So when subjects enter the symbolic they are plunged into a set of pre-determined relations, but are also confined to speech or language which seems "back-to-front". This can be seen as the failure of the symbolic to be able to articulate (adequately) need and satisfy desire. The Moor descends from "pure", undifferentiated (biological-libidinal) being (the "Real") into a kind of hell (Pandemonium) where he is, as he says, "expelled from his story" (the pre-symbolic world of undifferentiated being and satisfaction), and "tumbled towards history": i.e. a structured discourse in which he is caught and subject to the cultural/linguistic positions implied by the symbolic order and the losses and lacks that the entry into this order entails. From this point of view it is interesting to note that the novel is presented as a manuscript which the Moor has nailed to "a gate, a fence, an olive-tree, spreading it across this landscape of [his] last journey" (Rushdie, 1996:3); something tending to emphasize the purely textual nature of the subject's (his) story.

The Moor, then, can be said to come into existence as a purely textual phenomenon (another Lac(k)anian allegory of the entry into the symbolic) because the story cannot be read until the manuscript has been finished (nailed up) and the Moor has died. (The novel could be said to begin with not so much the Moor's last sigh, but his last written sign.) As Lacan said in one of his seminars (speaking of Oedipus' death): "I am made man in the hour when I cease to be" (Lacan, 1988:155). This could be read in at least two ways. One, the entry into the symbolic effectively cuts the subject off from the pre-symbolic Real, and so in Lac(k)anian terms a kind of "death" is enacted: to become "me" I alienate myself from myself - leave my pre-symbolic undifferentiated self (or as Lac(k)an might say, I can only find myself in the field of the Other). In this context it may be of interest to note that there may be, in the ghostly echo of the Moor's name, Moraes, "more ash" - given its pronunciation according to the Portuguese phonetic system; the Moor being of Portuguese extraction.) This leads to point two, that my sense of identity or "self" is not entirely dependent on me. "I am made", not only because "I", as a personal pronoun is a product of the symbolic (which structures "me" - which includes the unconscious), but that "I" am not the object of my making (my manipulations of the symbolic), in so far that my identity is also dependent on how I am seen as an object by others. As I shall suggest below, life and death only have meaning with relation to the symbolic. The death of the body is a return to the Real which could not be the subject of his story were it not captured within the symbolic register. Textual/symbolic death is only possible with the utter annihilation of all references to a subject - as sign, as memory - a total aphaniatic or fading (Lacan, 1979:207) within the system of representation.

3.2. Reading Real to reel.

At the point where the Moor is made and, paradoxically, ceases to be, he, predictably, in the Lac(k)anian scheme of things, suffers the fate of all who enter the symbolic: he is caught out by the Lac(k)anian axiom: language is not the property of those who use it. This is, perhaps, best exemplified by the great love of the Moor's life, Uma, who can be used to...
allEGOrize the Lac(ke)anian post-Saussurean view of the sign as a signer which can never be stabilized into fixed unequivocal meaning:

What was truly remarkable was that during that morning amble at Mahalaxme the newcomer [Uma] found a way to spend a few private minutes with each of us in turn, and after she departed, every one of us had a fiercely held opinion about her, and many of these opinions contradicted each other utterly and were incapable of being reconciled. (Rushdie, 1996:243)

Uma turns out to be protean: not just a signifier with multiple signifieds, but multivalent. She is also a gifted artist who is intensely disliked by the Moor’s mother; an abhorrence which is returned - but with a vengeance. That vengeance begins in the following way. One day, during the act of love, Uma mentions the mother’s hostility and the following scene takes place:

I confess that at that high instant I had no stomach for this talk. An obscenity sprang unbidden to my lips. Fuck her then. - “What was that you said?” I said fuck her. Fuck my mother. O. (Rushdie, 1996:252)

The Moor explains that Uma:

returned time and again to the topic of my mother’s hostility, until it seemed to become a part of what excited her. - She hates me hates me tell me what to do. - And I was expected to reply, and, forgive me, in the grip of lust I answered as required. Screw her I said. Screw her stupid the stupid bitch. And Uma: How: Darling, darling, how? Fuck her upside down and sideways too. 0, you can, my only sweet, if you want to, if you only say you want. - God yes. I want to. Yes. O God. (Ibid.)

What Uma does is to record these “obscenities” onto a cassette and, without the Moor’s knowledge, play them to his parents. This results in his banishment from the family home and disinheritance. Although a “vulgar” Freudian reading might see the whole incident as a displacement of the author’s latent oedipal fantasies, it can also be seen as an allegory of how language or the sign is never entirely within the subject’s control. On the surface the Moor utters the obscenities to please Uma, but Uma can be said to return them to their forbidden source, converting them, out of the context in which they were uttered, into expressions of the incest taboo. A Lac(k)anian reading could bring out both meanings; Uma’s exploitation of the words is not necessarily a distortion of some “original” meaning because there is no way to establish what that meaning might be; but on the other hand, this structure is like a parable of how the sign both represses and (indirectly) reveals oedipal desire.
Death Sentences

Signification could be allEGOrized in the following way:

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<tr>
<th>The Moor</th>
<th>Uma</th>
<th>The Moor’s Parents</th>
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<td>The Moor utters the obscenities thinking he’s satisfying a desire (which becomes a demand) but is unable to fully understand it (Uma’s needs are more complex than he thinks). He invests his signifiers with his own meaning but now they become Uma’s property.</td>
<td>Uma now possesses the signifiers (the obscenities). It could be (as the Moor thought) that she became sexually aroused while listening to them but she puts them to her own use. The Moor, from a Lac(k)anian point of view, could never satisfy Uma’s desires. Uma could symbolize the problems of signification: she is the carrier or medium of the sign always doomed to fail - the bearer of (mis)communication.</td>
<td>The Moor’s parents now take possession of the signifiers but do not understand the &quot;defiles&quot; through which the signs have passed (which I’ve symbolized as Urna). The obscenities, which the Moor uttered to satisfy Uma’s desire, now encounter the Name (or the Law) of the Father - the patriarchal law which prohibits incestuous relations and confers meaning on the signifiers. Thus the patriarchal law exercises its authority and the Moor is castigated: i.e. disinherited and cut off from his mother. It is worth noting here that, in conferring meaning on the signifiers, the patriarchal law is no nearer to &quot;truth&quot; or &quot;reality&quot; because the Moor’s parents are also duped by Uma, the &quot;defile&quot; through which the signs have passed.</td>
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Much later in the novel, when it is too late for a reconciliation with his mother (for she is dead), the Moor is sent the tape of obscenities by his father (a structure of linguistic relations reminiscent of those Lacan analyzed in his "Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter’" (Lacan, 1976)). On listening to the tape he believes he has solved the riddle of Uma’s treachery. This is what we might call the “Phallic function”; he believes he now understands everything - has a mistaken feeling of power and authority in his attempt to arrest the play of signification by giving it coherent meaning. However, from the Freudian/Lac(k)anian viewpoint the riddle still remains unsolved because although the Moor sees deception he fails to see the possibilities of a latent displaced meaning behind his words. The obscenities, from the Lac(k)anian standpoint, are not only an attempt to satisfy Uma’s desires (which he can’t fully understand or gratify) but, ironically, an unconscious attempt to satisfy his own repressed oedipal wishes, something also, according to the Lac(k)anian system, doomed to failure. What the Moor does not know (this is the job of the analyst) is that his unconscious desires are manifesting themselves through his speech - in this case in the most obvious and paradoxical way (in fact, in an almost unthinkable form in Freudian terms): what the obscenities mean at the surface level is what they mean at the latent level. But because the Moor thinks, or believes, that his

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words are satisfying Uma's desires, he never considers the possibility that they may be satisfying his own forbidden unconscious cravings. During the act of love he utters his repressed fantasies and would be said to satisfy them doubly: in the verbal expression of them, and in converting Uma into a displaced physical symbol of his mother.

As suggested above, although the Moor may have felt he was giving pleasure by satisfying Uma's desire, and although the desire he understood her to have may have been satisfied, he was unwittingly satisfying her hidden desire to destroy his relations with his family. He is, as a result of the mismatch between what he believes about Uma and what she turns out to be, decentred from the privileged place of provider of pleasure and subordinated as the victim of malice. He is, in short, not so much a victim of the return of the "real", but the return of the "real", made possible by this, a kind of Lacanian "spool" of criticism.

Here is a return of the "real" (spool) which can be seen as the return of the Lacanian "Real" because, as Zizek explains: "The role of the Lacanian real is, however, radically ambiguous: true, it erupts in the form of a traumatic return, derailing the balance of our daily lives, but it serves at the same time as a support of this very balance" (Zizek, 1991:29). This can be explained by observing that the return of the cassette is like a traumatic return (Uma's symbolic return(s) from the dead). But the Moor converts this trauma into the illusion of understanding: his impotence is converted into a form of potency where he now appears to wield interpretive authority over the sign and thus restore, if not a balance over his daily life, a certain illusionary power over the interpretation of his personal history.

At one point, when the Moor realizes that he has been the victim of Uma's deceptions, he writes: "To give up one's own picture of the world and become wholly dependent on someone else's - was not that as good a description as any of the process of, literally, going out of one's mind?" (Rushdie, 1996:267). Yet from the Lacanian perspective subjects are always in someone else's picture of the world, in so far that signification not only positions us according to its pre-determined rules and prohibitions, but that we are never in control of the symbolic system that enables us to represent, but more importantly, to be represented.

The Moor, then, in not knowing how he was viewed as an object of Uma's or his parents' gaze (as dupe on the one hand and obscene mother hater-lover on the other) is caught between his sense of self and how he is seen from the outside. It could be said, using a post-structuralist cliche, that he is radically "split": his identity is the object of representation; and he is divided in terms of what he thinks (the rational) and what is beneath his thinking (repressed unconscious desires). He is like the child at the Lacanian "mirror stage" who mistakes his self-image for a stable self which is beyond him because it is not entirely dependent on him; it being the product of how he is positioned and interpreted within the symbolic system of representation. It could be said that he identifies with a misleadingly coherent image of himself. However, it is worth remembering that even if Uma were not a deceiver, the Moor, from the Lacanian point of view, would never know himself or the Other, because the Real (like Kant's noumenon - that upon which language is working) could never be manifested as itself; it could only be represented within the misleading defiles of signification.
4. SENTENCING DEATH: THE SIGN’S LAST SIGH.

I wrote above that the novel can be seen as emphasizing that the whole narrative, and all those in it, are essentially caught within the symbolic order of textuality. Indeed, the Moor’s “last sigh” coincides with his abandonment of the text he has written, and the novel ends with a kind of postscript announcing his death - which, as suggested above, is the Moor’s last sign which brings the act of reading into play. (Actually, the novel is circular in so far that it begins where it ends in a graveyard just down the road from the “Ultimo Suspiro gas station” (Rushdie, 1996:4).)

I stressed earlier (quoting Lacan) that the subject comes to life at the moment when it ceases to be and in this way the Moor’s death becomes, paradoxically, a kind of birth: it is the moment (or the collection of dispersed moments) when the narrative comes into being (death, being announced both at the beginning and at the end, circumscribes all the events). The narrative, between these two chronicles of a death foretold, is strewn across the landscape which, metaphorically, allows the reader to step into it. The individual reader’s entry into the (fictional) symbolic order equals the narrative beginning (or birth) of the Moor. This moment of fictional death paradoxically allegorizes a Todorovian theme being also the moment of the possibility of his narrative life: that is, through the act of reading. The longer the Moor prolongs his fictional death (paradoxically through the narration of his entire life) the longer he can eke out his fictional existence. 17

As emphasized above, for the Lacan(an)ian the self is an “effect” of language - subjects are a product of the symbolic register, positioned by it and articulated through it. The only way to escape subjectivity is to abandon the symbolic, to die out of language, and this, in effect, is what the Moor seems to do. With the termination of his last page he effects what seems to be a textual (symbolic) death. But this is not so because it only, paradoxically, returns the reader to the point of departure (the phrase itself suggesting both beginning and (euphemistic) death).

How then would a symbolic death be possible? Again it is possible to turn to Rushdie’s novel for a parabolic model. The following passage has a “logic” of its own within the fictional world of the novel, because Uma could be said to be “polyphrenic” - a self made up of multiple selves. However, appropriately, when Uma dies, the Moor writes of her death:

Her face in death seemed to pass through a thousand changes, as if the pages of a book were turning, as if she were giving up, one by one, all her numberless selves. And then a blank page, and she was no longer anyone at all. (Rushdie, 1996:281)

To die both biologically and symbolically the subject must become like the blank page. It is only by turning the blank page, by escaping representation, that the subject and its multiple selves are finally allowed to rest. In effect, the subject as biological subject dies, but lives on, as long as it is caught within the symbolic. The subject’s death signifies the symbolic life even in biological death. For as long as the subject can be named it can be subject to the generation of numberless selves (like Uma and all the other characters of the novel). Not until all textual references to it are finally destroyed and it disappears from the realms of the symbolic and returns to the Real can it finally suffer the sign’s last sigh. But in this novel, because of its

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circular construction, the Moor's last sigh/sign seems to signify his first (and his first his last) in so far that the end is the beginning and the beginning is the end.

5. CONCLUSION: GOING ROUND IN (HERMENEUTICAL) CIRCLES. ON BEING OUT OF ONE'S MIND.

Not only can man's being not be understood without madness, it would not be man's being if it did not hear madness within itself as the limit of his freedom. (Lacan 1977: 215)

Coming back to Raymond Williams, although the implicit theory of language underlying his project of analyzing modern systems of communication was very distinct, he does touch on two factors highly pertinent to the thematics of this essay. The first is a phenomenological issue. "Many people", Williams notes "seem to assume as a matter of course that there is, first, reality, and then, second, communication about it. We degrade art and learning by supposing that they are always second-hand activities: that there is life, and then afterwards there are these accounts of it" (Williams, 1976:11). From the Lac(k)anian point of view adopted here Williams questioning of the "reality" and "communication" division is of great importance. Communication and reality are united in so far that they are attributes of the same thing: the symbolic order.

This first point is linked to the question of what it is this kind of Lac(k)anian interpretation is doing. Phenomenological research has helped to demonstrate that the objects of analysis or interpretation cannot be separated from the theoretical and methodological assumptions of the interpreting subject. This has resulted in a situation where to interpret the "other" has also brought with it a corresponding awareness of the role of the interpreting self. From this standpoint the subject/object opposition begins to break down resulting in forms of criticism where the interpretation of the object text is as much an allegorization of the method used.18 This, in tum, has links with the following point.

The second factor Williams mentions that has relevance to the thematics of this paper is epistemological. Williams claims that communication begins "in the struggle to learn and to describe". The passing on of this "learning" and description depends on "certain communication models, certain rules and conventions through which we can make contact" (Williams, 1976:11). The Lac(k)anian system (like that of deconstruction) can only serve as a communication model through a certain contradiction: theorists must suspend their Coleridgean disbelief in the duplicitous character of the sign and assign some value to what are perceived as the controlling concepts of interpretation. These concepts, however (as intelligible ideas which provide the conventions through which a "Lac(k)anian" reading is rendered possible) could never (according to the theory of the sign inscribed in these pages) offer the critic a set of conventions which were beyond the radical scepticism which would put them (and everything else) under permanent question - hence the multitude of qualifications in subclauses made necessary by self-defeating sentences which render the style here something of a linguistic assault course.19 What the dialectical tension between radical scepticism and the suspension of disbelief offers is a form of textual production (and distinctive kinds of description of human subjectivity) which challenges epistemological and hermeneutic practices.
that search for or promise authoritative, unproblematic interpretations. The theorist/ critic who is convinced by the rhetorical force of the Lac(k)anian critique of the sign is forced to accept that it is not only the interpretation that is unstable (a commonplace in much late twentieth-century cultural criticism) but that the theoretical system itself is not a stable entity with an a priori existence before the task of interpretation begins.

To put this another way, Roman Jakobson has made the point that a "message sent by its addressee must be adequately perceived by its receiver. Any message is encoded by its sender and is to be decoded by its addressee" (Jakobson, 1971:130). The problem here from the Lac(k)anian standpoint (as I have represented it) is that it is not only the message that is unstable, but also the code upon which the message is based. Also, the addressee and addressee are radically undermined because their perception of "themselves" is based upon their immersion in the symbolic order which constitutes the message and code upon which their notions of "themselves" as subjects or objects is based.

So critics can never be sure about the interpretation of the theoretical scheme before textual production begins. This, given the post-structural theory of the sign, would be true of any approach, but as I suggested in the introduction, the case of Lacan seems to provide an allegory of the epistemological, ontological and hermeneutical difficulties that beguile any attempt at interpretation. However, if all is lack, all is not necessarily lost. Lac(k)anian psychoanalysis can help to focus not only on the problems of the textual production of the object, but on the textual production that is necessary before the textual production of the object can begin. The interpreting subject, in this sense, can never really begin the work of objectifying the world "outside" because the theoretical model of language with which it starts both can, and cannot, be taken as "read". That is, it can be taken as read in so far that it has been subject to textual production (reading), but it cannot be taken as read (i.e., "certain") in so far that the interpretation of the system could never (in its own terms) be beyond question - it being an inevitable product of hermeneutical acts.

I have just written "in its own terms" which presents me with a double bind: to claim that the system radically calls into question unproblematic communication already assumes that some form of communication has taken place, but the question always remains: is this beyond hermeneutical doubt? Put another way, the plea on the part of the critic to understand the object under analysis is called into question according to a Lac(k)anian critique of the sign. Yet if the symbolic order is unable to satisfy the critic's demands to know the object, neither does it, or can it, satisfy the critic's desire to know the theoretical scheme that is supposed to provide the paradigm for an analysis of the object. Given the ontological instabilities created in the wake of postmodern discourses, Thomas Docherty has called for a certain "humility" via the object of understanding (Docherty, 1996: viii). This involves the location (and if necessary, production) of forms of difficulty. I would extend this "humility" (or what I'd prefer to call "wariness" or a certain hesitancy) to considerations of the conceptual bases of the forms of difficulty that are being produced: the theoretical scheme that gives the subject its position and the possibility of reading already an object of interpretation. If all this seems to point in the direction of madness, it may be worth recalling that for the Lac(k)anian critic ("I think where I am not...") etc.), like the Moor, there is no way one cannot be out of one's mind.

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NOTES

1. This article started out as a paper written for the twenty-first AEDEAN congress in Seville and a chapter on psychoanalysis in which I attempted to demonstrate to students how some simplified Lac(k)anian concepts may be put into practice (see Gregor and Waiton, 1997). Here I attempt to bring together the differing aims of the source material and put them into the thematics of “communication and culture: texts written in the English language”.

2. The book was first published in 1962, but I refer to the revised edition (revised first in 1966 and then slightly extended by the “Retrospect and Prospect” chapter in 1975).

3. My way of mediating the history of linguistics is influenced by the metaphorical master narrative of Kuhn’s The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (1970).

4. Relevant to arguments of the lack of a fixed centre from which to establish communication is Derrida’s “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourses of the Human Sciences” (Derrida, 1978).

5. I say “Lac(k)anian” for two reasons. Firstly, as is the case with just about every school of thought, there is no common agreement about exactly what the Lac(k)anian system is. Lac(k)anian thought being, like Marxism, Freudianism etc., a collection of “controlling concepts” which thematically unite those in the particular school. However, the content of the controlling concepts is far from fixed and a constant source of disputation. Secondly, this situation is made especially difficult for the “Lac(k)anian” by the fact that Lacan did not seek to be understood without effort: “Writing is distinguished by a prevalence of the text in the sense that this factor of discourse will assume in this essay a factor that makes possible the kind of tightening up that I like in order to leave the reader no other way out than the way in, which I prefer to be difficult. In that sense, then, this will not be writing” (Lacan, 1977:146).

6. Tracing the Greek etymology of the word allégory would bring out what I am trying to get at here. Allos is “other” and agooreo “to speak” from agora, a forum. To speak, to write, to express in any way is to perform within the sign system of the Lac(k)anian Other. Lacan’s definition of the Other (and any “other” concept) is notoriously arguable. One may start with “The Field of the Other and Back to the Transference” in The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis (Lacan, 1979:20f.).

7. Lacan goes into considerable detail about how, on looking at a painting, we are occupying the gaze of others (e.g. the painter or the audience it is associated with). See “What is a Picture?” (Lacan, 1979:105f.; especially 113).

8. For the subject’s division in the symbolic see “The Subject and the Other” (Lacan, 1979:204f.).


10. See, for example, chapter 16 of The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis (Lacan, 1979:203f.). One of the easiest ways of thinking about the Real is to see it as the phenomenal world or that which lacks the lack or that upon which the symbolic is at work (See Lacan, 1979:ix & 53–4).

11. In the Lac(k)anian system the unconscious is structured like a language because it is the discourse of the Other: that is, to say, the symbolic structures through which the subject articulates itself (and is amanulated by others) these being the unconscious mechanisms which render all forms of discourse possible in the first place.


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13. Uma actually turns out to be a manipulator, seductress and ruiner of people's lives. The fact that she seems different to the various members of the Moor's family is owing to her ability to "take on radically different personae in the company of different people" (Rushdie, 1996:266). Despite this, the passage can still serve as an allegory of the sign, but it must be stressed that it's an allegorization and not strictly descriptive of the fictional complexity of the character.

The italicized phrases in the following quotations are Rushdie's.


15. The novel is very suggestive from the point of view of an analysis of the instability of the sign, and I can hardly do justice to it here. However, an example: on Carmen's wedding night her husband, Camoens, instead of consuming the marriage, dresses himself in the bridal gown in order to escape the nuptial bed and enjoy a night of same-sex bliss. Thus, one signifier, the bridal gown, whose common signified is that of heterosexual marital union, slides across the signifying continuum to become a token of gayness and transvestism.

16. For the "mirror stage" see "The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I" (Lacan, 1977:1f.)

17. See Todorov's "Narrative Men" in The Poetics of Prose where he describes how Scheherazade's narrative loquacity in the Arabian Nights preserves her life; the conclusion being that "narrating equals living" (Todorov, 1977:73f). Foucault has reflected on the power of narrative to confer life and death from an historical point of view. The narration of stories, exemplified by the Greek epic and which functions as a theme and pretext in The Thousand and One Nights, was an attempt to "forestall death" or "postpone the day of reckoning that would silence the narrator" (Foucault, 1991:102).

18. Jeffrey Mehlman in his A Structural Study of Autobiography: Proust, Leiris, Lévi-Strauss has written: "Indeed, whereas the normal tendency or error - of "psychoanalytic critics" is to "use" Freud in order to "explain" a literary text, I have found myself more often referring to the authors studied here as a means of illuminating particularly difficult passages in Lacan" (Mehlman, 1974:15). See also Zizek who tends to practice this form of criticism.

19. Derrida has deconstructed Lacan's concept of "lack" on the grounds that it cannot really uphold the theory of lack. This is because Lacan has to privilege the word lack, which, far from being the sign for lack, par excellence, is the privileged signifier which renders the theory possible. In short, lack cannot be full of lack. The argument is considerably more complex than I represent it here (involving also the Phallus); however, see Derrida's "Le Facteur de la Vérité" in The Post Card (Derrida, 1987:413-496). Zizek has offered a defence of the Lacanian lack in The Sublime Object of Ideology (1989:154-5).

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