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# A Letter Always Reaches its Destination<sup>1</sup>

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Stephen Frosh

## The Letter

There is a large literature on writing, and a smaller one on psychoanalysis and writing. Unfortunately, I have not read much of it, so I will start from somewhere else, with some associations to Jacques Lacan's comment during his analysis of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Purloined Letter*: 'the sender, as I tell you, receives from the receiver his own message in an inverted form. This is why what the "purloined letter," nay, the "letter *en souffrance*," means is that a letter always arrives at its destination' (Lacan, 1966, p.30). This is one of only a small number of academic 'references' that I will give in this paper, as I want to explore something else about the dynamics of writing, but it is a useful one. What is it that always returns to the sender, and what is it that constitutes a letter's 'destination'? The most interesting rendering of this is from Slavoj Žižek (1992), who parses Lacan's claim in various ways depending on which perspective is taken in relation to the different orders of the Lacanian scheme, the Imaginary, Symbolic or Real. From the Imaginary point of view, the letter always arrives at its destination because wherever it arrives is *defined* as its destination. That is, '*whosoever* finds himself at this place is the addressee since the addressee is not defined by his positive qualities but by the very contingent fact of finding himself at that place' (p. 11). More formally, we recognise ourselves as the one to whom the letter is addressed, but this does not mean that it really was specifically addressed to us; it just means we believe (imagine) that to be the case.

When I recognize myself as the addressee of the call of the ideological big Other (Nation, Democracy, Party, God, and so forth), when this call 'arrives at its destination' in me, I automatically misrecognize that it is this very act of recognition which *makes me* what I have recognized myself as – I don't recognize myself in it because I am its addressee, I become its addressee the moment I recognize myself in it. *This* is the reason why a letter always reaches its addressee: because one becomes its addressee when one is reached. (p.12)

In this mode, as the letter circulates, it creates its subjects, its addressees: we imagine ourselves to be the one for whom the letter has been written. Something seems to speak to us in what is written and 'hails' us, to use the old Althusserian term; in responding to this, we act as if we are really the one for whom the letter's message was intended. In fact, however, there is a misrecognition going on. The letter had no such specific intended addressee, it was just sent out – a message in a bottle – and happened to land somewhere, with the receptive reader being struck by it and feeling hailed, spoken to, referenced; but this is a fantasy, though a significant one.

Žižek has a number of different Symbolic readings of 'a letter always arrives at its destination' which need not detain us here, save to note that one of them is 'the letter arrives at its destination when the subject is finally forced to assume the true consequences of his activity' – his 'moans and groans' as Žižek parodies them (p. 13).

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<sup>1</sup> In M. Weegman (ed) *Psychodynamics of Writing*. London: Karnac.

This suggests that in sending out the letter, the subject is caught out, not realising what is revealed by it, at least to the psychoanalytic eye. We write the letter and send it; either it goes to the wrong people (we hit 'reply all' unthinkingly) or it reveals more than we intend (a parapraxis intervenes, and we say 'love' for 'live', etc). It then comes back to us to reveal the 'true', repressed intention: hostility or desire. It also references a further Symbolic rendering of the formula 'a letter always...': 'one can never escape one's fate...the symbolic debt has to be repaid' (p.16). The theme of fate calling is very present here (the opening of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony is often experienced this way, fate knocking out our door, yet this is in truth nonsense), and certainly resonates with the 'letter' formula itself. Something that cannot be escaped always comes back to haunt us, however much we might think we have evaded it, however unaware we are of its existence in the first place. Did I know of this desire or this hostility? It is there face to face with me when fate calls, when the whole world reads my email; it instructs me as to whom I might be. This links, finally to the Real element:

A common pretheoretical sensitivity enables us to detect the ominous undertone that sticks to the proposition 'a letter always arrives at its destination': the only letter that nobody can evade, that sooner or later reaches us, i.e. the letter which has each of us as its infallible addressee, is death. We can say that we live only in so far as a certain letter (the letter containing our death warrant) still wanders around, looking for us. (Žižek, 1992, p.21)

If this has shades of Woody Allen's dancing grim reaper in *Love and Death*, it is perhaps no accident: Žižek is particularly well attuned to the way popular culture is often close to the truth. Žižek complicates this by pointing out how the letter is not just death as a negative, but also *enjoyment* – but we can perhaps leave him here, as my point is simpler. When we write and then send a 'letter', the only thing we can be confident about is that it will always find its way back to us, in one manner or another, disturbing the scene with its effects. (This is, by the way, encouraging as well as threatening: as hardly anyone actually reads academic writing, it is good to know, as an author, that it will at least have one real, surprised reader – oneself.)

## Writing without Direction

If the act of writing produces a letter that then finds its way in the world, creating its readers but also folding back on the writer, what is it that produces the writing itself? Much of the time academic writing is defensive, taking refuge in obscure terminology or supposedly 'objective' distance, erasing the writer as if the resulting text can be a kind of absolute, offering a set of truths unadulterated by the writer's passions. There is no need to deal in detail with the lacunae in this version of things – it is a truism of psychoanalysis and psychosocial studies that locating oneself outside the 'line of the Symbolic' in this way is impossible. We are always implicated in what we write about. A more challenging question is whether we *only* write about ourselves; that is, if the writing concerns something of personal significance, how much of the 'person' can and should go into it? And what could this 'personal' investment be, given the difficulties (psychoanalytic, poststructural etc) of locating any such thing? For my students, this is always a problem. Should they write about themselves self-consciously, knowing that they can only portray a part of what is relevant, knowing that every revelation is also a disguise, a twisting of the truth into something that is readable? Even the most self-reflective person has a subjecthood that is shrouded and opaque, and academic writing

is not necessarily the place where one can strip this bare, even though the appeal of my 'discipline' of psychosocial studies for some students seems to be precisely that it licences the expression of emotion and self-revelation. Self-revelation is necessary but by definition inevitably unsuccessful: it puts us into the writing, but it is neither the writing itself nor, thankfully, 'us'. And sometimes, it has to be admitted, it is no more than 'confessional', and embarrassing, and dull.

So the bigger issue is how to be involved in what we might be writing whilst also respectful of the distance between the authorial subject and what is written, and between what we might believe we are saying and what the message could be. It relates to the powerful intervention into psychoanalysis that comes from Jean Laplanche (1999), specifically his notion of the 'external' locus of subjecthood, which he understands as having to do with the enigmatic message placed in the human infant by the sexual unconscious of the other. For example, it is not known to the mother how much her erotic life is pressed into action by her contact with the child, but this is nevertheless passed on by her to her infant as an unconscious message, an indigestible piece of psychic activity. Unintentionally, unbidden, the adult implants in the infant a disturbance that cannot be fully interpreted, but that remains encrypted as the kernel of the unconscious. If we take this as a model, then the broader idea – about living, about writing – is that whatever we think we are doing, something else operates within us (routinely for psychoanalysis, the unconscious) and this something else comes initially from 'outside'. It is 'enigmatic' because we are stirred and aroused by it, but never can manage or control it, or fully interpret it. Under some circumstances, however, we may be able to give voice to it, and this could be those points where Lacanians see the Real. That is, whilst we can never move out of the circuit of the Symbolic when reflecting upon ourselves, so conscious self-referencing works only to a certain extent, releasing ourselves to the process of writing might at times let something else speak with the voice of a certain kind of non-Symbolic truth. All I am suggesting here, through this rather rarefied vocabulary, is that we might not always know what we are doing when writing, and this is likely to be a good thing.

My own writing often surprises me. This can be very disappointing, when I read back something I wrote long ago and think, 'Did I write this?' 'How come I can't write anything as good as this anymore?' Even worse: 'How come I am still writing exactly the same thing, sometimes in almost the same words, and it is still not right, yet twenty years have gone by?' Mostly, I sit down to write with very little optimism, get distracted by emails which I pretend are unwelcome, watch Youtube videos and look for chocolate, and in between force a few words out, desperately monitoring the word length counter (I am up to 1746 here). The text grows, and as long as I resist the temptation to lift and re-use large chunks of previously written material, or to start from the beginning again, I can close my mind to what I am producing, hoping for the best. My intentions are always good: I will radically revise what I have written in this ridiculous unmediated way, I will craft and correct and make sure *this time* that I have produced something of value. On a bad day, everything gets put off for a week or two. On a good day, it turns out that apart from the vast array of typos that need correcting (not caused, on the whole, by unconscious impulses but simply by clumsy fingers) what I have written is more or less what I am stuck with. The odd thing is, I rarely recognise it as my own even though I was there during the writing; I cannot work out how it got from me onto the screen; and I realise that I have somehow felt more real during this process of production than I do

most of the rest of the time. This is what is so surprising: how something comes from somewhere 'else', unintended and relatively unprocessed, yet also comes from 'within', carrying with it some affective power even when the content is abstract or academic. All this is to say that the act of writing can be a way of escaping from the constraints that come from acute self-monitoring; and that this is akin to a psychoanalytic process, with all the difficulties of letting go and facing our internal difficulties that psychoanalysis and writing share.

Writing in this unplanned, directionless way is a mode of trusting oneself. The problem is, are we, am I, trustworthy? If we know as little about ourselves as psychoanalysis posits, then it is likely that amongst the various surprises that such writing can produce might be a set of unpleasant discoveries. There is a long list of possibilities here: superficiality, envy, hostility, narcissism, silliness, incoherence, wishfulness... Occasionally – the hope that keeps me going – we might discover unexpected creativity and even enjoyment, but given the nature of things this does not happen all that regularly. Instead, the letter that returns when I read back what I have written is too often something painful enough to require censoring. This is not necessarily because of what it explicitly states, but is more likely to be a problem of tone. In the gaps of meaning, something is revealed which is not all that desirable, which might be a useful piece of private knowledge, but perhaps best not shared. So much of this is like the psychoanalytic experience that it worries me: is psychoanalysis a mode of writing? Does it involve reading back to the subject the message that she or he has sent out unawares, a horrible dark mirror that unsparingly reveals the violence that lies in what might seem to be the most anodyne politeness, the lustfulness that is present in care, the puffing up in modesty? If this is the case, many of us might be forgiven for writing at all, and perhaps this is one source of writer's block: the danger of exposure, the fear that we will be seen through in the moment of being read.

### What is it like...?

I am not too keen on giving an example here from my work, as it is precisely the problem of self-revelation and self-scrutiny, and the limits of self-knowledge, that I am exploring. But I will nevertheless reflect a little on the difficulty of writing in such a way that the letter that returns is fuller than the intention might have been. Recently, I wrote a paper on Steve Reich's string-quartet and tape composition, *Different Trains* (Frosh, 2017). This piece of music, which is perhaps classifiable as a 'Holocaust memorial' composition, moves me greatly and also raises a number of issues about the limits of witnessing that have both academic and personal moment for me. I explored this in the paper and am reasonably happy with the result. But reading it over, I am struck by a simple question that was asked of me by someone who read it early on, and that I have not been able to answer: what was it like for me to hear *Different Trains* for the first time, and what was it that made this relatively small piece of music stand out from the great mass of Holocaust art, music and literature so that I felt I wanted to write about it? Which is to say not that this question cannot be answered, or at least cannot be answered in a reasonable, approximate kind of way (because for all the reasons mentioned earlier, I am not likely ever to know for sure and in detail exactly what it was that made me want to respond in writing to this piece rather than any other), but rather to note that however engaged my writing was, it did not explain or communicate this

more personal element. Instead, the writing revealed a gap, which at least for someone curious and sympathetic constructed the question: 'Yes, but, what is it like...?'

So, 'What is it like?' What is it that becomes embodied in a writing that comes to life, able to express and maybe trigger a set of ideas that are honest in relation to the emotional origins of investment in the material? My *Different Trains* paper clearly begs this question even as it addresses it, by which I mean that it conveys a message about how difficult it is to find a way to approach such emotive memorialisations without either sentimentality or denial. I think this is all right; I am not too hard on myself, but I wonder how it would be to reflect more openly on the question and to write about it in an academic piece of this kind. This is probably not the place for a full-blown answer, even if I were capable of providing it, though my sense is that part of the story is that I had a specific and powerful reaction to the music and especially to the way Reich uses the sampled speech rhythms of various speakers, including Holocaust survivors, to drive the melodic lines played by the string quartet. The resulting hauntingness of this is profound: even when the words being spoken are hard to hear, their 'resonance' spreads like a stain across the music and stays alive and echoing right through to the end. My response to this was to offer an emotional welcome to the soundscape of the music, to feel liberated from a simply cognitive understanding and instead absorbed into something edgy. To me, the music seems just about to steer successfully between abstraction and self-aggrandisement, between voyeurism and identification with suffering. My guess is that Reich manages this very difficult task well, even if there are moments when the project collapses and even if his achievement is very precarious and open to challenge. Something about the way he uses his own experience (the first part of the piece draws on his memories of childhood journeys on trains across America, going between his separated parents) and sets it up against the Holocaust testimonies (his 'different trains') is dangerous and serious, and makes me hold my breath to discover if it would work. I do not even know for sure that it does work, only that it is worth the effort.

This is still, obviously, not a proper answer to the 'What's it like?' question. My written article leans on the power of the musical composition by describing and evoking it, so some of the energy in it is not my own. But I guess it arises from a specific passion – for finding a way to identify without colonising, to be both at a distance (the music is formal, constructed) and present (it is also emotional and lyrical and uses potent narratives); and without consciously working this out, I tried to reproduce this in my own written piece. In that sense what I did was derivative of the music, yet there is enough in it that implicates me to raise the original question, 'So what was it like?' What it was like, in fact, was overwhelming, emotional, troubling, confusing and exciting; but this list does not really help at all.

### **There and back again**

Here, finally, is a story that I offer as a meditation on writing, a kind of parable or 'modern midrash'. As I do not want to reproduce any of my 'academic' writing here, it comes instead from the written version of a set of panel comments I made at the Birkbeck Critical Theory Summer School in July 2016, drawing on some lectures I gave that week and on a book review of a study of one of Freud's grandsons, Ernst. The

context was a discussion of the Death Drive, which for whatever morbid reasons kept cropping up in my debates with the students. Here I am trying to think about what made the 'discovery' of the Death Drive so poignant.

It is worth remembering the historical circumstance, the massive destruction of the First World War and the appalling demonstration that the drive to build up civilisation might not be the centre of human longing. There is also the small, exact biographical moment of the fort-da game, Freud's observation of his grandson Ernst's play, which indeed became the best known moment of Ernst's life. It took place when he was just 18 months old, in September 1915, and still called Ernst Wolfgang Halberstadt (he changed his name to Freud later in life). *Grosspapa* Sigmund visited his daughter Sophie in her home in Hamburg and watched his little grandson at play. Ernst's simple game has become the most famous one in the history of psychoanalysis, and was forced to bear an enormous weight of meaning in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* – the book that introduced the Death Drive, the incitement that repeats inside each of us to return to the dust whence we came but also to make mischief and sew destruction along the way. By the time the book appeared in 1920, millions had been killed across Europe in the Great War; and Sophie too, Freud's 'Sunday child', was dead of the Spanish flu, along with twenty million other people. Little Ernst's contribution towards this, in the happier time when his sweet and attentive mother was still alive, was to take a wooden reel and throw it into his curtained cot, so it would disappear from sight. 'O-o-o-o,' he would say, which his mother and grandfather translated as 'fort', 'gone'; and then, with a 'joyful "da",' he would draw the reel out again into the light. The game would be repeated tirelessly: *fort* and *da*, or at least that is what we assume Ernst was saying, gone and back again. Psychoanalysis would never be the same after this observation was written up, its essential nature as a practice of repetition becoming increasingly recognisable: over and over the same process, throwing something out of sight, drawing it back in again. Now we see it, now we don't; an infantile game that can sum up a whole lifetime.

Why bring this up here? In the background were the great social events of the First World War, the terrible barbarism that, unimaginably, was in the end a precursor of even worse to come. Also in the background, but explicitly referenced by Freud, was the fort-da game and his grandson, shadowed by history and by a future of emotional difficulty after both his mother and his younger brother Heinerle died. Freud's writing of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud, 1920) was a 'scientific' exercise, but it was fuelled by these social and personal events, and it shows the effects of this in its ideas (Death Drive) and in some of the manner of its writing (the fort-da game). My response to this has always been quite intense, relating to the War and its effects, but in the passage above I was under the influence of reading Benveniste's book on Ernst, and the deep suffering that came to him from his mother's loss and his grandfather's inconsolability over her death and that of Heinerle, her second son. Writing later to Ludwig Binswanger, whose own young child had just died, Freud commented, 'For me, that child took the place of all my children and other grandchildren, and since then, since Heinerle's death, I have no longer cared for my grandchildren, but find no enjoyment in life either' (Benveniste, 2015, p.79). So poor Ernst, all those losses and rejected too as bringing no consolation to his grandfather. Is any of this in my own written response to Benveniste's book? I think it's an overwrought passage, not



particularly careful or as austere as I might want it to be; the losses that Ernst and his grandfather experienced were too strongly conveyed, too alive even nearly a century later, to be kept at bay. I wonder if what happened is that there was a kind of unconscious communication from one text to another that results in a mode of affective engagement almost despite my writer's urge towards caution. Writing is a process of thought and craft; but if you let it run, without so much meditation and direction, it can come out oddly, not as expected, but still true to something, unwieldy perhaps and in need of careful management, but nevertheless real. Freud's extraordinary ability to observe and then draw far-reaching conclusions that would have an impact right through the culture is one thing that marks him out as a great writer. Living in the echoes of this, in its ripples, my own writing could only soak up his style and his feeling and half reproduce it, half engender it with something new. I am sorry for Freud, sorry for Ernst, but never knew quite how much, until there it was on the page in front of me.

Like Lacan's 'letter' formula, the fort-da game prefigures the repetition compulsion: everything comes back, everything returns to the one who originated it. In my case, what is revealed is at least my sense of the suffering of this small boy and the shadow it throws over the future of psychoanalysis; and how Freud's own melancholy meant that he could offer little sustenance at that time to his most needy family member, and how attuned he was to the darkness that would soon engulf Europe. Freud's writing sublimates his distress, making a theory out of it; yet it is also the prose of a prophet and moralist, increasingly so as the 1920s and 1930s wore on. My reaction to it knocks me off balance and links with the response I have described to *Different Trains*; yet once again, it is a discovery, not an intention, and one that always puts the writing in jeopardy just as it breathes life into it. These letters that always reach their destination result in us being called to something, but also, once they are prised open, reveal a great deal about the limits of what we can consciously know about ourselves, and how our writing might take us over and leave us somewhere uncomfortable, but also – I hope – able to discover something new.

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