

INCANBESCENT ALQUADETS: ERRANT LANGUAGE POETICS

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Summary: This paper explores an array of errant language experiences in relation to psychoanalysis and the unconscious, such as word play with signifiers at the end of analysis, an accident in printmaking as a source of new writing, and, with respect to the psychotic structure, visual and literary examples of the sinthome. The paper, constructed as a poetics of the human, follows the associative logics and ethics of psychoanalysis itself,

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PART ONE

The elements: A poetics of errant language
 An artful accident in letterpress printing
 A sinthome made in psychosis
 An invention of spliced signifiers

*Errant language: straying, wandering, erring words circle the Real, the unsayable.

*A frisson of words and silences that touches the Real.

*A poetics, a musical accompaniment to incompleteness, enigma, and the experience of voice. A poetics relies on the audible, and its unheard resonances.

“The written word is the limit or shoreline
against which the Real breaks into the symbolic.”
(Lacan, 2013)

“Psychoanalytic poetics implies an act of language which displaces, dislocates the
master signifier. It is a poetics that exceeds the analyst and the analysand.”
(Laurent, 2012)

The source of this talk is an accident in printmaking while working in letterpress in the studio. I am using a table-top Kelsey press with a paten surface rolled with black ink. My press is old, small, hand levered, and finicky; sometimes the inked rollers jump off while printing.



Kelsey Press, circa 1893

The letters of my chosen font have been arranged in reverse sequence. I have filled the chase, a metal frame around the type- filled in with ‘furniture’, various pieces of wood, then tightened with a cotter pin so that nothing slips while printing.



I register my paper and make a proof. ‘Incanbescent Alphabets’ becomes ‘Incanbescent Alquadets’. I have reversed the direction of d, p and b. I laugh. I like this very much.

Incanbescent
Alquadets

South African artist and printmaker William Kentridge, leaning into repetition in his studio practice, writes in his book *Six Drawing Lessons* (2014):

IN PRAISE OF MISTRANSLATION
 MEETING THE WORLD HALFWAY
 POEMS I USED TO KNOW
 MAKING A SAFE SPACE FOR STUPIDITY
 DRAWING WITH ONE EYE SHUT
 CIRCLING THE STUDIO
 PERFORMANCES OF TRANSFORMATION
 PICASSO ON SAFARI
 VIVA LINOCUT VIVA!
 WHAT WE LEARNT AT SUPPER
 THE FACE OF THE OTHER (AN ETHICAL DEMAND)
 TORSCHLUSSPANIK

William Kentridge, *Six Drawing Lessons*, p. 4

“I find and repeat the list four or five times in different notebooks... Each time I expect the list to be different; each time to my surprise, it is the same, or almost the same. But in the reordering, the slight shift, the word that is illegible, we make some new crack, a new element enters the list, makes a space for itself – and this is the guest we have been waiting for.” (p. 117)

The letter for Lacan underpins the very structure of language; it has no meaning in itself; it is of the Real, of the body and its drives. Another way to think of the letter is that it is the guest of language circulating through signifiers to form the body itself.

The letter is the guest of the drive. An errant guest, ghosting its origin.

PART TWO: Three Trajectories of Language Errancies

Trajectory near the end of an analysis

Writing from clinical notes, I liberally cut, elide and erase... italicize for emphasis, repeating lines in a musical, aural arrangement. Making a poetics in this way, the original notes of the sessions are altered. Such a writing entails loss, an inevitable element of a psychoanalytic poetics. I revisit my analysand's speech to adumbrate

her words with unheard resonances. I write as snow drifts, meandering through my notes to discover how *this singular voice* sieved down through that vast sky of words day after day, landed in the field of my waiting silence, and into her waiting ears.



My analysand, in his final year of a twelve-year analysis, knows well how to explore dreams and his unconscious. His dreams become condensed, mysterious to him; he makes up new words; he poses his paradoxical questions and hears the signifiers of his analysis in new ways. I say little as a matter of style, even less now. To listen to him is a stunning experience of language, what it can and can't carry. Discovering a hidden *jouissance* in the address of his symptom, he finds a new use for his symptom; he is less frightened of it, able even to enjoy it.

Speaking near the end of analysis, something unreadable from his dreams confronts him with the voice. As the voice of the Other returns, he works in a new form: splicing and reinventing signifiers. My analysand is curiously bound to and free from the demands of the Other that have shaped his life as he engages in this work.

The voice is inside the Other, taking part in signifying sounds; but as a senseless remainder, it escapes the Other who is the guarantor of its sense. The voice makes a parenthesis, a hollow in the Other. It is this hollow in the Other that leaves a place for enigma, a place for desire.

But the subject must play his part in it, he must assume that he can hear Other than what is said. This is how Lacan (1975-1976) formulates it: “We have to incorporate the voice as otherness of what is said [...] A voice is incorporated and this is what can give it a function in modelling our void” (Lacan, 2016, p. 9).

It is a complicated sentence that underlines the following moments: the voice is first external to the subject; it comes from the outside. Its otherness becomes internal only once it has been separated, made to be alien to us, even from the sounds of our own voices. The voice is thus the ultimate separation object. The subject and the Other have in common this void, this lack. The subject can situate his voice as object ‘a’, that is to say the senseless part of its enunciation comes into the Other’s void where it can resonate. In the same way, the Other’s sayings resonate on the subject’s side where the voice as object has modelled a void; it allows him to be sensitive to the otherness of what has been said.

The subject’s alienation to the Other cannot exist without a separation; its function is taken by the voice-remainder: as object ‘a’. Otherwise, we are in psychosis. The psychotic, as Lacan teaches, ‘has the object a in his pocket’.

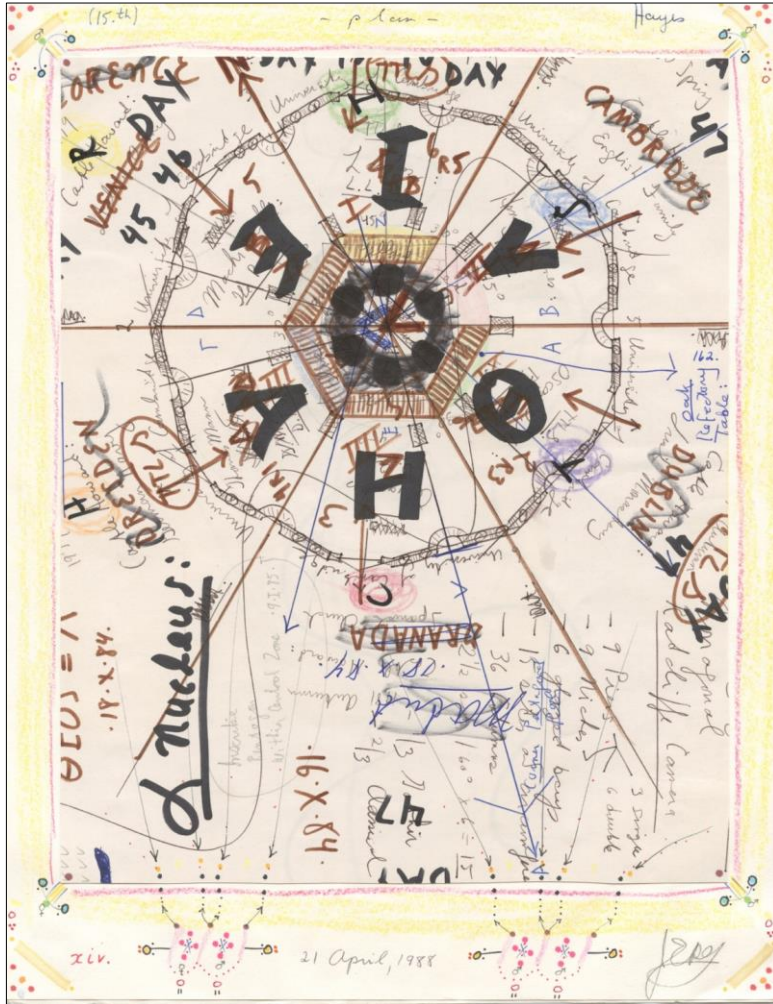
This structural fact, that the ‘a’ is not separate, is easily identified in psychosis. What cannot be symbolized in language breaks into voices and powerful suggestions that operate upon the subject, leading toward delusion and the project of repairing language in delusion.

Trajectory in John Devlin’s Art

Following a psychotic breakdown in 1979 in Cambridge, England, John Devlin created a utopian world he called *Nova Cantabrigiensis* – an imaginary city, an artificial island on the North Atlantic coast of Canada. He made his drawings while he lived with his family and moved in and out of hospitals. His art of the 1980s includes drawings, annotations, dates, formulae, diagrams, symbols, and repeating forms. Devlin, in an interview with Tony Thorne (2012), explained:

“My theory is that for ideal design, there is an Ideal Ratio. I have been hunting for such a constant. I was on a Faustian Quest for

arcane knowledge that would explain the magical ambience of Cambridge” (pp. 43-44).

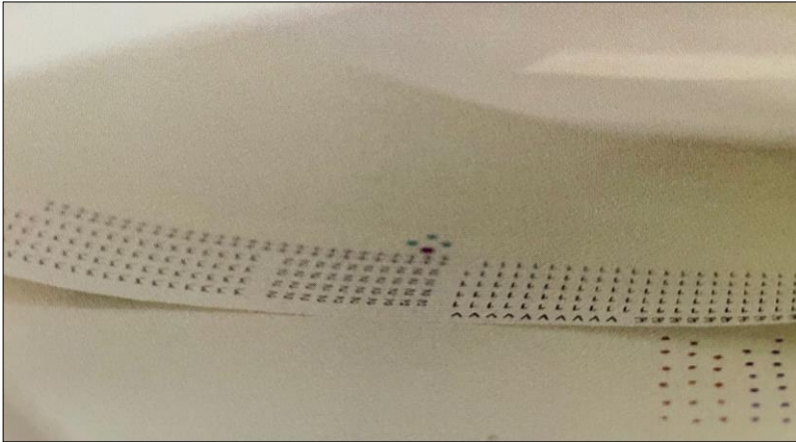


John Devlin, *Untitled #162*, 1988, Mixed media on paper, 27.94 × 21.6 cm, élisa et christian berst collection, Paris

The layered work of *Nova Cantabrigiensis* is not apparent to the viewer of catalogues and gallery websites. To encounter the original works is to find another construction on the verso or backside of his drawings, or sometimes within layers hidden between the front and back. When I visited his main gallerist, Henry Boxer in 2016, he

showed me piles of Devlin drawings, thick with glued papers. Boxer also shared with me a typed letter from Devlin, written in 2012:

“The drawings, for anyone who has seen them close-up, consist of layers and layers of various pieces of paper, all blued together with white glue... This is because when I was creating them, the numbers and ratios I was working on at the same time kept on shifting. As I settled on one type or family of numbers I would secretly code each drawing with a slip of paper.”



John Devlin, *Nova Catabrigiensis*, p. 27
galérie christian berst, Paris

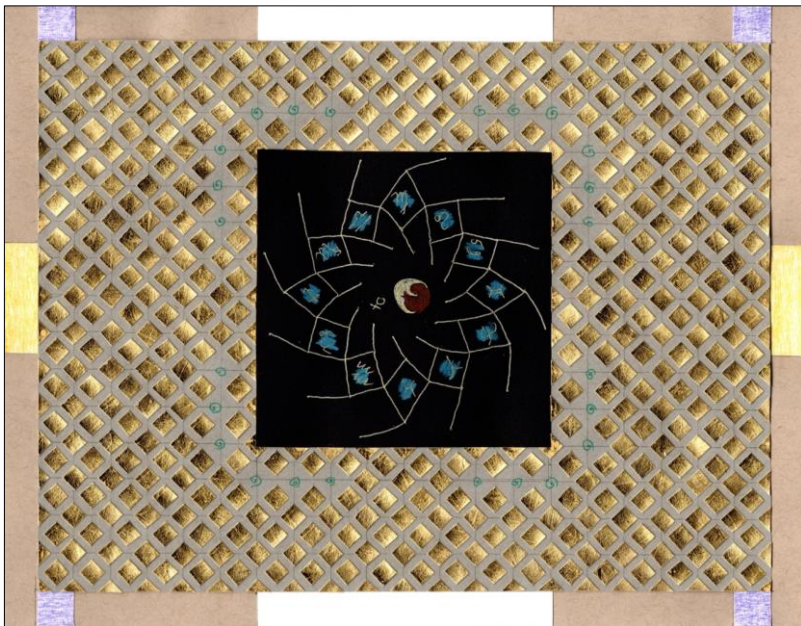
John Devlin’s search for a magical a ratio was an extensive effort to repair language when it no longer functioned in the years following his breakdown. I visited John in 2018 in Dartmouth, Canada, where he lives, makes his art, and works as a volunteer at the Nova Scotia Art Museum. We met for several days, speaking of our experiences of psychosis and the trajectories of our lives. John explained that he has “lost access” to the magical worlds he had been creating in his drawings of the 1980s that interested collectors of ‘Outsider Art’ such as Henry Boxer. But this loss, he explained, was tempered for him by landing in “lucidity, a kind of oasis from the confusion of psychosis.” And his art changed. John showed me his art in gold leaf. The work involved meticulous work with patterns in gold leaf arrangement. He said that he was sorry that “no one seems to take any interest in it.”

New Work by John Devlin: Gold Leaf and Exhibition

I have called the earlier work of Devlin in the 1980s his ‘incandescent alphabet’. For the psychotic structure incandescent alphabets carry the *jouissance* of the subject. Incandescent alphabets also reference the idiosyncratically encoded, indecipherable language that is a part of delusion, closed to questioning.

What I want to underscore here is that incandescent alphabets can be transformed or reconfigured by the subject of psychosis. John Devlin has done this, I believe.

His work over the past ten years partakes of wit (one work he calls ‘Cornflakes’) and draws from his experience seeing work in gold leaf by Klimt at the Neue Galerie in New York in 2014. He cites *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I*, 1907.



John Devlin, *Untitled #1618*, 2018, gold leaf and mixed media on paper, 21.6 × 27.94 cm, Collection the artist

Devlin continues to pursue ratios, in an entirely new way. For several years we have corresponded via email and exchanged works in progress. At one point, John asked me if I knew any place where he

might archive his gold leaf works. The search for an archive is itself a question of symbolic legacy, a wish to leave a trace of his work. I was not able to be helpful in finding such a space for his work. I was thrilled when John sent me a notice of his first solo exhibition in Toronto, hosted by Erin Stump, who recognized a change in Devlin's art and was drawn to it: *John Devlin: Out of a Heart of Quiet*, Jul 30 - Aug 27, 2022. Devlin's recent work has also been showcased online through *Caesura Magazine*.

I find certain marks from Devlin's drawings of the 1980s (dots, symbols, ratios) in these new works with their intricate, surprising patterns and reversals. And yet, this work is new. John Devlin is an artist in the world, he seeks a symbolic legacy, he is one who has chosen lucidity.

Trajectory from Joyce's Riddles to Remaking Language



From the time Joyce wrote *Dubliners* (2005 [1914]) he created moments of profound confusion in his characters, individuals caught in enigmas and riddles, and alongside the enigmas we find 'epiphanies', written in vivid, almost hallucinatory fragments. Joyce

did not present epiphanies as spiritual revelations, nor as realizations, but as moments portrayed outside of conscious knowledge.

Lacan reads such epiphanies as instances of radical foreclosure of meaning, in which the Real, the impossible to say, to know, or to realize – emerges. Joyce makes use of these moments of profound dislocation or confusion and has done so from the start of his writing life. For example, in *Dubliners* he uses indirect discourse (a point of view that allows his readers a broader view than the protagonist narrating the story), to show his characters are mistaken about the whole picture. Readers find momentary, vivid impressions that the characters cannot explain or even fully formulate. In this sense, Joyce's epiphanies are inextricably connected to enigmas. Joyce raised the two-sided experience of enigma and epiphany to an art in his writing.

What, we may well ask, is this link between the enigma/epiphany pairing in Joyce and his repeated construction of a riddle, of himself at the heart of a riddle when reading his work?

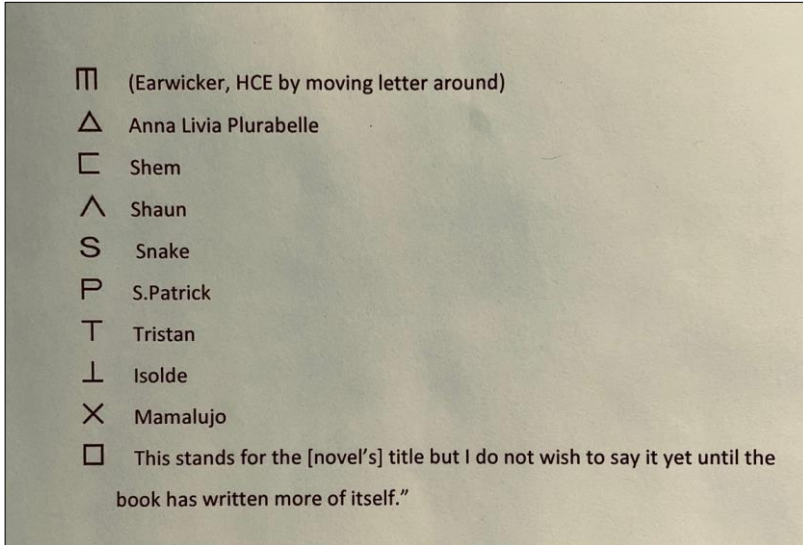
In Seminar XXIII, Lacan reminds us of a riddle posed by Stephen as a young man school-master in *Ulysses* to his students: "The cock crew/ the sky was blue;/ the bells in heaven/ were striking eleven./ 'tis time for this poor soul/ to go to heaven" (Lacan, 2016, p. 14). The class cannot figure it out, and Stephen provides the answer, "The fox burying his grandmother under the bush" (Lacan, 2016, p. 14). Of course, this does not make sense. But Lacan calls the answer 'a creation'.

In *Finnegans Wake* (1999 [1939]), Joyce remakes language by destroying it and remaking it, dissolving language as we know and use it. Joyce works on this project in notebooks, using scraps of language and inventing visual symbols as analogues for characters.

Jonathan McCreedy (2010) in *Everyword for oneself but Code for us all!: The shapes of sigla in Finnegans Wake* highlights the shapes Joyce created while working on this book.

"In short, the sigla are a collection of symbols or pictorials which Joyce composed for use in his *Finnegans Wake* notebooks. Each character: HCE, ALP, Shaun, Shem, Issy etc. has a sigla, which

would represent their name in shorthand. Joyce detailed his basic sigla system to Harriet Shaw Weaver, in a March 1924 letter. The eight protagonists are listed here in their purest forms”:



Jonathan McCreedy, *Genetic Joyce Studies*, 10, 2010

There is something of the returning riddle of *language itself* in this final work. *Finnegans Wake* (1999 [1939]) begins in the middle of a sentence: “riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of short to bend of bay, brings us by a commodious vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs....” It ends, too, mid-sentence: “... A way a lone a last a loved a long the.” We read it as it beginning again: “riverrun, past Eve and Adam’s...” Language loops back upon itself.

Joyce has made a new social link of Joyceans, those of us who are devoted to unraveling his riddles because the resonance of his language makes language new. His writing may be tied to his private *jouissance*, but it speaks to a wider social link, and, more accurately, it creates a new social link that did not exist before. Lacan has renamed Joyce: *Le Sinthome*.

Returning to the Trajectory of Psychoanalysis

The path of the sinthome that Lacan describes in his seminar on Joyce is also the trajectory of analysis in the last years of Lacan’s

teaching. Analysis, he says; “is a response to a riddle, And analysis is a matter of splicing and suturing” (Lacan, 2016, p.15). What is at stake is enjoyment, and to render that freedom of enjoyment possible (enjoyment by this point in Lacan’s teaching, refers to the *body enjoying*), “When we make this splice. . . we teach him [analysand] to splice, to make a splice between his sinthome and this parasitic Real of enjoyment. And what is characteristic of our operation, to render this enjoyment possible, is the same thing as what I will write: *j’ouis-sens*. It is the same thing as to hear a meaning” (Lacan, 2016, p 15).

This splice that makes a new link between the analysand’s symptom and the parasitic Real of enjoyment in language, *j’ouis-sens*, pertains to the psychoanalytic clinic. As analysts we would do well to listen for nonsense and melody – and this is the case not only for the psychotic, but for *everyone* who would do an analysis after Lacan.

Trajectory from An Artful Accident to New Writing



I printed my letterpress accident onto a monprint abstract image in black, white, gray, and blue layers of ink, with drawn transfer lines of red- then glued the print onto the top of a red wooden card box. Inside the card box, three recessed areas comprise the interior space. On the left I have placed a small handmade accordion book with my

new writing. On the right, assembled monoprints of ten cards stamped with letters. In the middle, the printed face of a man, an old marble, a tiny flat bronze rabbit (not visible in the image) and a child's ring.

My new writing has its origin in ten dialogues with my dead father, written in my study in Ireland in 2014. I took the last of these and opened it up to language in a new way, hearing through the incandescent alquadets, as it were. This form of poetics is not unique to me. The word music at the edges of lost meaning can be found everywhere in poetry. George Starbuck's *Fable for Blackboard* (2012) carries his playful fricatives and alliteration: "Here is the grackle, people./ Here is the fox, folks./ The grackle sits in the bracken. The fox/ hopes." (p. 193).

Erasing letters and replacing them cumulatively, carrying each of the changes into the next iteration in six sequences, I wrote to hear something new, other. These are they:

1.

"Everything returns to the silence from which it came – the blue of origins recedes to a lighter and lighter blue until it's a sheen of light. The alphabets disappear and you are left with a burning, an incandescence that inhabits your body," I said, or perhaps thought.

I listened, – but the wind in the trees was not my Father's voice, and the rattle of rain against the windows did not form any word.

2.

"Every return to silence- blue of origins re-seeds to a lighter

and brighter blue until it's a sheen of light. The alquadets disappear and you are left with a burning, an incanbescence that inhabits your body," I said, or perhaps thought.

3.

"Every return to silence- blue of origins cedes to a lighter and blighter blue until it's a sheen of blight. The alquadets disappear and you burning, an incanbescence inhabits your body," I said, or pairhaps thought.

4.

"Every turn to sigh less- blue origins cede a lighter and blighter flue until it's a shine of blight. The alquadets disapair and you burn, an incanbescence habits your body," I sed, or pairhaps nought.

5.

"Have her re turn to sigh less- blue origins cede a light blight flu until a shine of blight. The alquadets despair and burn, an incanbescence habits your body," I sed, or pairhaps nought.

6.

“Her turn to sigh less- blue
 origins cede a light blight flu a
 shine of blight. Alquadets
 despair burn, an
 incanbescence habits,” I sed,
 or pere nought.

I listened, – but the wind in the
 trees was not my Father’s
 voice, and the rattle of rain
 against the windows did not
 form any word.

Why do this, you may well wonder.

My father’s grave is unmarked. Recently I went with my sister, with a map of surrounding marked graves and instructions about how to pace out the spaces between graves, to stand on the place where my father’s bones rest in a wooden box in a cemetery in St. Louis. Yes, a wooden box.

I wrote to collapse what I had written before, to allow myself to alter sound, syntax and sense in surprising ways, to make every word fresh and strange. I wrote at the edge of nonsense in order to hear what remained of the Unmarked Father: the one with no marker, as though he had never lived, as though he’d left no legacy whatsoever. I wrote in the tradition of Joyce’s experiments with tearing language to pieces, in the face of my failure to find an archive for John Devlin’s art, I wrote to discover that such word play would not return me to psychosis, but to something else.

Incanbescent Alquadets (Rogers, 2022) was on display at the Sanford Gallery at Zea Mays Printmaking, an exhibition curated by Rich Turnbull. It exists alongside other artists books made by printmakers in a community of books and makers.

PART THREE: Returning to the list

A list of Language Errancies:

Incandescent Alphabets Reconfigured as Sinthome
Errancies from the Couch
Errancy in Art and Writing

I have foregrounded errancies by psychotic subjects as forms of invention concerning the enigma of language in two distinctive trajectories: James Joyce through his literary riddles; and John Devlin's art in *Nova Cantabrigiensis* and his later art in gold and mixed media. I have also presented an example of inventive language in neurosis at the end of analysis, of proliferating slips and enigmatic phrases spliced as nonsense by an analysand to discover a new use of his symptom, to create a sinthome: a knowing what to do with one's symptom. The accidents of artists, including the mistake I made in letterpress printing and the new writing it generated, also functioned as a sinthome in a wider social link: a space of making artist's books in a printmaking community and writing beyond psychosis.

Errant language in all these instances moves toward a poetics of the human – drawn from those very errancies. This poetics also speaks to ethics in psychoanalysis: an ethics of the human, aligned with the lacking subject and the lacking Other – central to our practice. It is a poetics and ethics of the voice: sounding, resounding, speaking: "Soul, take thy Risk!" (Dickinson, 1997).

This is an ethics of waiting for speech to surprise us, which is to say emerge through the portholes of the unconscious, through those gaps and errancies in which language leaves us in disarray, each of us, when we can bear to hear them.

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