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Lacan on Writing and the Unconscious: The Sliding Signifier

In Jacques Lacan's essay "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud" he not only qualifies structuralism to define his theory of psychoanalysis – he more specifically uses literary representation as a metaphor to explain the way in which the unconscious expresses itself. This metaphor underscores the uncertainty of language and the structure of the unconscious. For Lacan, the signifier is closed off from the signified in language in the same way that the unconscious is divided from consciousness entirely. Lacan explicitly refers to the way in which the unconscious does represent as a form of writing. He writes "it is precisely the fact that . . . the dream run[s] up against a lack of taxematic material for the representation of . . . logical articulations . . . that proves [it is] a form of writing" (456). Here, the dream and writing are synonymous in that they are both defined by the uncertainty of representation. Lacan pushes Saussure's idea about this autonomous nature of language to its extreme. He places the priority on the signifier instead of the signified and, accordingly, his qualification of structuralism leads to psychoanalytic theory. This is because, for Lacan, language is completely autonomous whereas for Saussure language is capable of mediation in spite of its autonomous structure. For example, Saussure writes about the "sliding of the signifier," or the ambiguity of representation, as a phenomenon that takes place over time and must be accounted for. Lacan talks about this same phenomenon being inherent in every act of speech. It follows that language and the unconscious create meaning in the same way because both are closed systems, not to mention the fact that language, even for Saussure, is a very psychological phenomenon. This paper will offer a reading of this essay which focuses on the motif of uncertainty in Lacan's interdisciplinary study of linguistics and psychoanalysis.