

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 8 (1995)

Artikel: The perforated text of origins - Radcliffe Camera
Autor: Bronfen, Elisabeth
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-99910>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 02.04.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

The Perforated Text of Origins – Radcliffe Camera

Elisabeth Bronfen

The day-dream is a shadow play, utilising its kaleidoscopic material drawn from all quarters of human experience, but also involving the original fantasy, whose *dramatis personae*, the court cards, receive their notation from a family legend which is mutilated, disordered and misunderstood. Laplanche and Pontalis

Hysteria: “Maladie par représentation”

In his writings on day-dreams, Sigmund Freud not only points to the fact that fantasies are intimate possessions, but more importantly that – like nocturnal dreams – “they are also an imagined scene representing the fulfillment of a wish, a happy person never fantasizes, only an unsatisfied one” (“Creative Writers 146). Every fantasy is, then, in some seminal sense an articulation of a lack. Most fantasies, Freud goes on to explain, revolve around self-aggrandisement and the fulfillment of erotic desire, and produce a narrative where the plenitude supposedly possessed in childhood is regained – the protecting house, the loving parents and the first, usually autoerotic objects of the dreamer’s affectionate feelings (148). However, as is so often the case in Freud’s analysis of the psychic apparatus, what is ultimately at stake is the issue of balance. For while fantasies of restoring a lack may satisfy, once fantasies become over-luxuriant and over-powerful, the conditions are laid for an onset of neurosis. Fantasies, after all, are also the immediate mental precursors of neurotic symptoms.

In order to clarify this exchange between fantasy and symptom-formation I want to recall yet another moment in Freud’s description of the psychic apparatus – namely the metaphor he chooses to describe repression. “Every mental process,” he argues “exists to begin with in an unconscious

stage ... and it is only from there that the process passes over into the conscious ... just as a photographic picture begins as a negative and only becomes a picture after being turned into a positive. Not every negative, however, necessarily becomes a positive; nor is it necessary that every unconscious mental process should turn into a conscious one" (*Introductory Lectures* 259). While the psychic apparatus is like a camera, indiscriminate in the impressions it will record, the unconscious censors the development of certain representational negatives into positives. Yet by repressing, even as it retains these representations, the unconscious also engenders symptoms, which Freud defines as a substitute for something held back by repression. Like a representative, one could say, the symptom fills in the gap in a sequence, stands in for an occurrence that did not take place. It occurs precisely because the development of a negative was interrupted. Yet even as it serves as a substitute for what is repressed, a symptom also marks the return of the repressed – the encroachment of the retained but undeveloped negative upon the conscious life of the subject.

For my reading of Ann Radcliffe's *Romance of the Forest* (1791) I want to suggest that in the course of her romance quest, the heroine Adeline gains that triple site of plenitude Freud designates as the aim of fantasy – a house, a family and a reliable object of desire (a husband) – albeit belatedly. If we follow Freud in recognizing Her Majesty the Ego as the heroine alike of every daydream ("Creative Writers"), then Radcliffe's romance can be seen as an allegory for the vicissitudes of feminine subjectivity, as well as for the feminine oedipal journey (Massé, Langbauer, Modleski). I want to go a step further, however, and see Adeline not only as a fantasizer par excellence, but moreover as the late 18th century version of the hysteric. For in an effort to distinguish between obsessional neurosis and hysteria, Freud after all significantly aligns the symptoms of the hysteric with dreams and fantasies, namely when he suggests that like these, the hysteric's symptoms aim at an oblique form of wish-fulfillment. The hysteric becomes the figure of the dreamer and fantasizer par excellence.

Two traits of this so-called "feminine" disorder need to be highlighted before I can show in what sense Adeline represents the feminine malady hysteria. *Firstly*, the hysteric suffers from mnemonic traces of a psychic trauma whose origins she does not know or has repressed. Now, when there is no conscious reaction whatever to a psychical trauma, the memory of it retains the affect which it originally had. Indeed Freud discovered in his hysterical patients "nothing but impressions which have not lost their affect and whose memory has remained vivid" ("On the Psychological Mechanism"),

that is to say pathogenic memories. Hysterical patients, he concluded, suffer from incompletely abreacted psychological traumas, they “suffer from reminiscences ... they can not get free of the past, and for its sake they neglect what is real and immediate” (Hysterical Fantasies 160). What is particularly salient in the case of Radcliffe’s heroine, however, is that the repressed traumatic reminiscences from which she suffers are not her own but rather an unconscious paternal legacy.

Secondly, this gap in conscious knowledge calls forth not only anxiety but also a gesture of conversion – the somatisation of conflictual unconscious representations. For Freud also believed he had discovered that “hysterical symptoms are nothing other than unconscious fantasies brought into view through ‘conversion’” (“Hysterical Fantasies” 163), the involuntary irruption of what was banned by repression to the unconscious. The symptoms he noted of hysteria are all characterised by an over-strong enervation, an excitation (tears, fits, hallucinations) or inhibition (melancholic languor, paralysis, senselessness). Whether as mnemonic symbols of traumatic impressions or as substitutes for the return of these traumatic experiences, hysterical symptoms and attacks in some sense always stage the realisation of unconscious fantasy scenes. The loss of consciousness, the *absence* so common in hysterical attacks, indeed, constitutes the acme of this process of satisfaction. When the investment of attention is suddenly removed, Freud argues, a momentary void in consciousness ensues, and this “gap in consciousness ... is widened in the service of repression, till it can swallow up everything that the repressing agency rejects” (“Some General Remarks” 234). In the hysteric’s symptoms one could say, the gap in knowledge and the gap in consciousness conflate.

To stay within my photographic metaphor: in a gesture mediating between an impulse to articulate and an impulse to suppress, the hysteric speaks with her body the many mental traces accumulated in her psychic apparatus, namely in fits of excitation and paralysis, in hallucinations and absences. Significantly, Pierre Janet called hysteria a “maladie par représentation” (illness through representation). In the following I will use *The Romance of the Forest* to theorise the interstices between the encroachment of trauma on feminine subjectivity as the origin of fantasy on the one hand, and fantasies of origin as the hysteric’s symptomatization of this incursion on the other hand. I will connect the primal trauma, which Adeline returns to and represents by virtue of her hysterical symptoms, with the loss of a house, the loss of parents and the emergence of ambivalent objects of desire: the staples of Freud’s day-dreams. It is this sense of

dislocation, of psychic woundedness and vulnerability which her fantasies are supposed to assuage. If the patients of Charcot and Freud in the late 19th century could find the means of causing their hysteric symptoms to disappear by learning the traumatic origin of their symptom and elucidating the affects connected with it, this romantic hysteric, I will argue, must discover the origin of her trauma by re-constructing a narrative of her family origins, by acquiring archaic knowledge, whose mnemonic traces she finds inscribed in her unconscious. Her narrative reconstruction puts an end to a symptom by speaking about its founding trauma, to be precise by verbalizing an inherited trauma, so that her fantasies in a sense stage and fulfill the desire of her dead parents. My argument will be that in the course of her encounter with this traumatic return of repressed archaic knowledge, Adeline's dreams, hallucinations and somatic symptoms develop these inherited memory traces into representations – hysteria, a “maladie par représentation.” Thus the text of Romanticism this Gothic narrative unfolds is a text of origins that are always already representations, so that the primal scene around which the entire narrative circles is not sexual but textual. At the same time this text is also a perforated text of origins (ridden with blank spaces, faded passages, fragmented), precisely because here the family legend is mutilated – for Adeline, as I will show in more detail in a moment, the family legend appears as the barely legible fragments of a paternal manuscript and the falsely attributed maternal seal.

The Gothic romance plot of origins

In a forest outside Paris, the nineteen year-old beautiful and melancholic Adeline, who has just left the convent where she was brought up, is given to Pierre La Motte by ruffians as he is fleeing from his creditors and the persecution of the law. Together with his wife, his servant Peter and this orphaned girl, La Motte seeks shelter in an abbey, about which rumours abound that a man was forcibly brought here, confined and murdered. During one of her nocturnal explorations of this abbey Adeline indeed discovers a secret chamber, and in it a manuscript in which a man describes the agonies of his confinement as he awaits his execution. Within a short period of their arrival, La Motte's son Louis appears, falls in love with Adeline, proposes to her and is rejected because she has in turn fallen in love with Theodore. Theodore is a soldier in the regiment of the Marquis de Montalt, the proprietor of the abbey, to whom La Motte, in turn, is under obligation because he tried to rob and kill him. The Marquis also falls in

love with Adeline. Radcliffe thus confirms Freud's claim that a necessary constituent of day-dreams is that all the men invariably fall in love with the heroine. The Marquis' proposal also is turned down. In response, the Marquis involves La Motte in a scheme to capture Adeline as she is fleeing from the abbey, so as to imprison her in his villa until she has given in to his seduction. Theodore, who had tried to warn Adeline but was sent away by his jealous commanding officer before he could do so, unexpectedly reappears in the garden of the Marquis' villa and helps his beloved escape from her violator. At an inn the Marquis' men catch up with them, Theodore is wounded, and in turn wounds the Marquis. Now under arrest for desertion as well as for attacking a superior officer, he is brought to an army prison to await his trial. Adeline, once more separated from her lover, is forcibly returned to the abbey, again the prisoner of the Marquis, only now (because he has discovered who she is), he no longer wishes to seduce her but rather to murder her.

At this point Adeline finds herself as the nexus between a surrogate father who has betrayed her (La Motte), a lover who has been mutilated and awaits his death on her account (Theodore) and a jealous rival bent on vengeance and destruction (Philippe, Marquis de Montalt). But like all heroines of day-dreams, Adeline is invulnerable in the midst of her staged vulnerability and, aided by La Motte, she flees with Peter to his native village in Switzerland, where she is taken in by the La Luc family. While La Motte, who has been arrested and taken to prison, awaits his trial in Paris, M. La Luc embarks on a journey with Adeline and his daughter Clara toward the south of France, because his health requires a change in climate. There, upon accidentally meeting Louis La Motte again, they discover not only that Theodore is the son of La Luc, but that he has been sentenced to death. They immediately go to the military prison in Vaceau and on the morning of his execution learn that the King has issued a reprieve, owing to information that has emerged in the course of the La Motte trial. At this point we discover that Adeline is in fact the daughter of Henry, Marquis de Montalt, who was taken prisoner and killed by his brother Philippe, while the infant girl was given to a foster father Jean d'Aunoy, later sent to a convent and upon her decision not to stay there, taken away by the Marquis' men to be killed in the forest outside Paris but instead given to La Motte. Due to the seal which Adeline used on a letter to Theodore that was intercepted by the Marquis, the latter discovered her real identity and sought once again to have her killed. This seal belonged to Adeline's real mother, was passed on to the Marquis, was stolen by d'Aunoy and given to his wife,

who in turn gave it to her foster daughter Adeline. She kept it as a memento of the woman she thought was her mother. That is to say, as Adeline in the course of her family romance exchanges lowly parents for high parents what remains constant is the maternal insignia. On his deathbed Phillipe legitimises Adeline, and as the reinstated Marquise de Montalt, she achieves a pardon for Theodore and the sentence of exile for La Motte. Having buried the skeleton of her father in the family vault, she is seemingly delivered of her hysteric symptoms, especially her melancholia and with Theodore by her side returns to Lelancourt in Savoy to live there as Mme La Luc.

Although in its most general outline the plot of *The Romance of the Forest* reveals precisely those erotically encoded fantasies of self-aggrandisement which Freud sees at the core of all day-dreams, I want to suggest a more intricate pattern. Fantasies are, I have already suggested, the means by which a hysteric can disguise the real traumatic events of her childhood by translating them into an imagined scene that veils a reminiscence without entirely obliterating it. At the same time fantasies also mark the moment of mediation between the conscious and the unconscious, given that under the censoring aegis of repression, they merely screen an impossible traumatic knowledge by modulating this forbidden knowledge into a belated and distorted articulation. Freud, therefore, argues that psychic not material reality is the decisive constituent of neurosis, precisely as this welds an unconscious desire with a fantasy representation. For this process he claims to have isolated three particularly prevalent scenes. He calls these “primal fantasies of phylogenetic endowment,” because here the individual reaches beyond her own experience into primaeval experience. She does so because her own experience at this point is too rudimentary – a claim one can certainly make for the young Adeline, just leaving her convent. “The seduction of children, the inflaming of sexual excitement by observing parental intercourse, the threat of castration (or rather castration itself)” Freud suggests, “were once real occurrences in the primaeval times of the human family, and ... children in their fantasies are simply filling in the gaps in individual truth with prehistoric truth” (“Introductory Lectures” 371).

For my discussion I am less concerned with the ontological status of this prehistoric truth. Rather, I want to highlight the process whereby Adeline’s hysteric symptoms develop not only owing to a hyper-investment of fantasies. I want also to suggest that she develops primal fantasies of heritage, seduction and castration so as to fill in gaps in her individual knowledge by having recourse to archaic knowledge. For Adeline is uncannily attracted to her father’s manuscript, as she is uncannily attached to

her mother's seal, even though in both cases she can not supply the concrete points of historical reference. She fantasizes a paternal death and a maternal indestructibility although the knowledge she has access to is ridden with gaps – the manuscript is barely legible and its author unknown, the seal is attributed to the wrong woman. For Adeline any conscious memory of her parents is irrevocably lost even as it is precisely this lack which forces her to fill in the perforations of her own romance trajectory with the phylogenetic text, the archaic trauma, inscribed in her unconscious, a trajectory, that leads her from the convent to her final, and indeed first home in Savoy.

Elaborating the point Freud raises, namely that fantasies fill in gaps with inherited knowledge, Laplanche and Pontalis emphasize that all three primal fantasy scenes – of heritage, of castration and of seduction – involve the human subject's desire to solve the riddle of its existence, to explore the issue of origins, that is to say encircle the subject's initial questions, Who am I in relation to my heritage? What is the origin of my body's anatomy? What is the cause of my drives, my desires, my fantasies? "The original fantasies" they argue, "also indicate a postulate of retroactivity: they relate to origins. Like myths, they claim to provide a representation of, and a solution to, the major enigmas which confront the child. Whatever appears to the subject as something needing an explanation or theory, is dramatized as a moment of emergence, the beginning of a history." For these fantasies of origins, Laplanche and Pontalis claim "the primal scene pictures the origin of the individual; fantasies of seduction, the origin and upsurge of sexuality; fantasies of castration, the origin of the difference between the sexes." Through these constructed scenarios, these quests for origins, they conclude, "we are offered in the field of fantasy, the origin of the subject himself" (19). The significant border, then, does not run between unconscious and conscious fantasies. Rather the division at stake distinguishes between the original or primal fantasies, that is to say between the "inherited memory traces," the archaic knowledge with which each subject fills the gaps in individual truth on the one hand, and on the other secondary fantasies, whether repressed or conscious, where the daydream symptomizes unconscious desires, where hallucination revives a real traumatic event.

Two Dreams

What Radcliffe's narrative illustrates is that the primal trauma, veiled and articulated by fantasy, is precisely this pool of archaic knowledge, this phylogenetic endowment, which is always already repressed in the hysteric's unconscious. As such this archaic material engenders fantasies circling around the issue of origins as these modulate into scenes of castration and seduction. A good place to illustrate this transformation of trauma (or archaic knowledge) into fantasy-symptoms, I suggest, is to analyse Adeline's two dream-representations. In so doing, we must, however, always bear in mind that, as Laplanche and Pontalis argue, in fantasy the subject does not form a representation of the desired object, but rather is herself represented as participating in the scene (17).

The first dream occurs just after Adeline has left the convent and is waiting in the house she believes to be her father's, unaware that Philippe de Montalt has had her brought here to be executed. As she explains retroactively to Mme La Motte "the anxiety of my mind prevented repose; gloomy unpleasing images flitted before my fancy, and I fell into a sort of waking dream: I thought that I was in a lonely forest with my father; his looks were severe, and his gestures menacing: he upbraided me for leaving the convent, and while he spoke, drew from his pocket a mirror, which he held before my face; I looked in it and saw, (my blood now thrills as I repeat it) I saw myself wounded, and bleeding profusely. Then I thought myself in the house again; and suddenly heard these words, in accents so distinct, that for some time after I awoke, I could scarcely believe them ideal, 'Depart this house, destruction hovers there'" (41). This dream-representation will induce a fever attack, once La Motte has taken her away from the house of potential destruction, and in that sense it is the first of several sequences where Adeline's hysteria literally engenders an illness through representation. The masochistic fantasy scene represents the threat of mutilation, stemming from her father, who castrates her by showing her her own wounded body – significantly through the mediation of a mirrored image. This in turn can be read as a sign of her menstruation, a sign that sexual violation has occurred, or possibly even for forbidden auto-eroticism, the classic encoding of the castration fantasy. But I am less interested in suggesting which interpretation should be chosen. Rather, I want to read this scene structurally, as the staging of a question – Why am I cut? What is the origin of this wound? The threatening incursion of sexuality and/or of mortality onto my body? And I want to emphasize that here Adeline is the

passive object of a threat which is above all visual. Her father forces her to look at herself as she is alienated into an image, and into the image of a wounded body to boot.

The second dream, also merging seduction and castration, is particularly significant in that it shifts from Adeline as threatened object to Adeline as active spectator. This product of her perturbed fancy occurs in the abbey, after she has discovered her love for Theodore and her ambivalent fascination and abhorrence for the Marquis, and while her suggestible nature has incorporated La Motte's unexplained melancholia as well as the rumour about the mysteriously murdered man. As in the first case, this dream will also engender a "maladie par représentation," namely hysterical languor, tears and a fainting fit. However, because it stages a shift from a masochistic to a sadistic fantasy scene, the dream calls forth another hysterical symptom, the act of detection, in the course of which Adeline finds the prison chamber and the perforated manuscript of her actual father. This second dream fantasy is divided into three parts. In the first part Adeline finds herself in the prison chamber she will later discover, at the bed of a man "convulsed in the agonies of death." Shocked by the spectacle she starts back, but he stretches forth his hand and seizes hers violently. The sexualization of this scene of mortality transforms the dying man into a man of "about thirty, with the same features, but in full health, and of a most benign countenance," who smiles at her. As he is about to speak, "the floor of the chamber suddenly opened and he sunk from her view. The effort she made to save herself from following awoke her" (108). That is to say, in this fantasy scene Adeline not only condenses the dying father with the future husband but, more importantly, she merges the inherited traumatic knowledge of mortality represented by the spectacle of his dying with the satisfaction of sexual desire promised by the young man. For the satisfaction threatens to call forth a gap – and we recall Freud's formulation earlier on – that will engulf the dreaming subject completely, subsuming her into the pool of archaic knowledge that so uncannily draws her into an identification with her father through death. This unbearable proximity to her traumatic kernel awakens her from her dream.

The second part of the dream stages her pursuit of a man in a black cloak through a long passage. As she turns back, she finds that it is in fact she who is being pursued, and the terror this reversal occasions lets her wake up a second time. That the beautiful male body is not even a dissimulating shield of death is played out in the last part of the dream, for here Adeline gives in to the seduction of her pursuer and follows him into a funeral chamber

where she once again finds the Chevalier lying in the coffin, his features serenely sunk in death; “While she looked at him, a stream of blood gushed from his side, and descending to the floor, the whole chamber was overflowed” (108ff.). Once again the sound of a masculine voice brings the horror of the scene to an unbearable climax, and she finally wakes up completely.

The threat of mutilation that caused satisfaction in the first dream-representation has been transferred to another body and satisfaction now resides in seeing a masculine body bleeding. Even though here, too, her own vulnerability is representationally at stake, these scenes stage her proximity to her traumatic kernel by casting her in the role of a sadistic spectator. If we again read the scene structurally, the question it seems to pose is “in what sense is a paternal death the origin of my existence and the origin of my desire?” Seduction is welded with the primal scene in that it is the dying man who tries to seduce her; castration merges with seduction, in that Adeline is drawn by a cloaked man to the spectacle of a mutilated body, a sight of horror that promises to flood her with obscene satisfaction. The fact that these two dreams show her as wounded and viewer of someone else’s wound, as pursued and pursuer illustrate that simultaneity of contradictory actions which Freud (“Hysterical Fantasies”) calls the bisexual nature of hysterical fantasies. For he had noted that in her histrionic attack, the hysteric will often play both the masculine and the feminine part, the subject and the object of mutilation or seduction. Above all, however, Adeline’s dreams illustrate that the archaic trauma, whose mnemonic traces haunt her mental camera only to draw her into a chamber of death is the trauma of “mortal danger” and it is around this traumatic pool that the three original fantasies Freud discovered – the scenes of heritage, castration and seduction – are arranged as modalities that simultaneously shield and articulate the repressed, impossible, obscene knowledge.

Three original fantasies: family romance, desire and symptom

My thesis can be visualized, if one takes Slavoj Žižek’s (23, 182) triad of objects that function as screens meant to help distance the subject from unconscious traumatic jouissance and prevent her from being engulfed by this abyss or non-symbolized kernel. In Žižek’s re-reading of Jacques Lacan’s terminology, the first position – the *nom-du-père* – is represented by the signifier of the barred Other, a sign for the Other’s inconsistency, exhibiting the failure of “ordinary” paternity and patriarchal law. It refers to

a figure who guarantees that we will be able to endure the inconsistency of the symbolically structured culture as well as any sudden re-appearance of the traumatic. At the same time it represents the father's impotence, i.e. that as barred Other, he is not able to live up to his name, to his symbolic mandate, that he is lacking, surrogate, himself inconsistent. One could speak of the father sacrificed to become law. This figure sustains stability in the midst of inconsistency. The second – the *objet a* – represents the object-cause which propels our desire to construct coherent narratives, to unravel the secret of desire. This indifferent object incessantly disappears and reappears, consists exclusively in the fact that it has some signification for the heroine, that it is of vital importance to her. One could say, it marks the pure semblance which sustains the heroine in her oedipal journey, which keeps the romance quest afloat. The third – the *père-version* (or Father-of-Enjoyment) – represented by the capital Φ (phi), stands for an embodiment of an impossible jouissance, a fascinating image of lethal, nauseous enjoyment, the terrifying and fascinating materialization of trauma and forbiddance, an obscene and revengeful left-over after the father has been sacrificed to become law. The Φ is neither exchangeable, like the father's name and his representatives, nor indifferent, like the *objet a*. Comparing the three positions, Žižek suggests that while the signifier of the barred Other marks the point of impossibility around which a symbolic structure is articulated, and while the Φ is a manifestation of this impossibility, the *objet a* is an imaginary concealment of the impossibility. For Adeline's romance one could speak instead of the *impotent father* (point of impossibility), the *perverse father* (manifestation of impossibility) and the *imaginary lover of plenitude* (concealment of impossibility).

I want to embellish Žižek's triadic diagram by substituting his three modalities of desire with a triad of the original fantasies. In so doing I suggest placing the PRIMAL SCENE or HERITAGE FANTASY into the position of the *name of the father*, the SEDUCTION FANTASY into the position of *desire*, and the CASTRATION FANTASY into the position of the *father of enjoyment*. Then, in a second step, I suggest turning each modality into a triadic structure in its own right. Fantasies belonging to the triad of the FAMILY ROMANCE, whose nexus is the *signifier of the Other's inconsistency* (the *barred Other*), or the failure in paternity, represent answers to the question "Who is my father and mother; what was the scene of my conception?" Given that the origin at issue here is the position of the subject within a particular lineage, the prominent scene is that of the FAMILY ROMANCE as a rediscovery qua invention of adequate parents. In the triad of DESIRE, whose

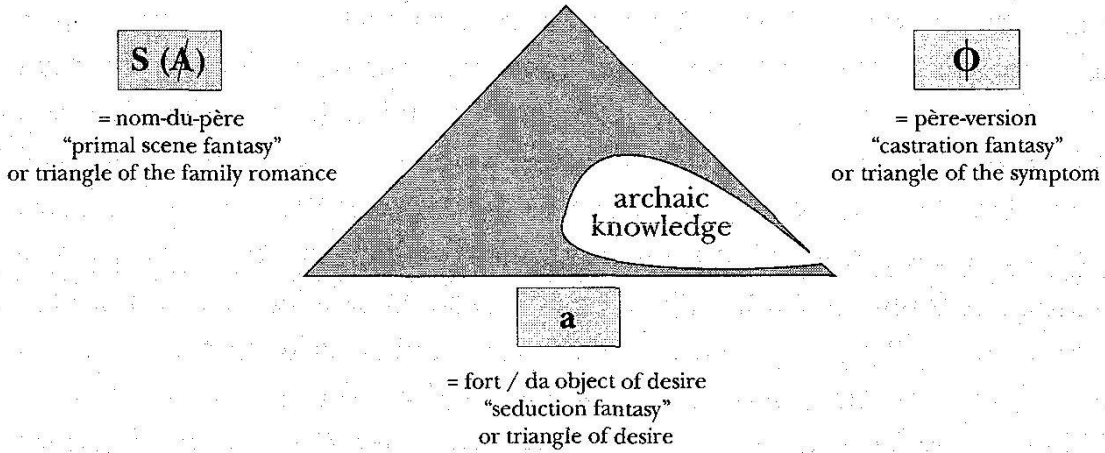
nexus is the constantly appearing and disappearing *object* that sustains imaginary romance narratives, the crucial question is “what object do I desire to satisfy my libidinal longing?” Here the question of origin revolves around the emergence of sexuality, and the privileged fantasy is one where a sense of plenitude is constructed over deferral. Finally, for fantasies belonging to the triad of the SYMPTOM, whose nexus is the *fascinating object of lethal desire*, the Other threatening to draw the subject into an obscene, destructive enjoyment, the central question is “am I masculine or feminine and how does my gender relate to my bodily mutability?” Given that the issue of origin debated in this fantasy scene is that of the emergence of sexual difference, the privileged scene here is one of mutilation, where in a gesture of sexualizing mortality the subject imagines scenes of mutilation inflicted by the Other – the fantasy Freud labeled “a child is being beaten.”

Like the triad discussed by Žižek, these TRIANGLES OF FANTASY – I want to argue – stand in for and screen the primally repressed traumatic material, the pool of archaic knowledge. They are the traumatic effects, radically perforated because the original fantasy scene they refer to is, in Laplanche and Pontalis’ sense always retroactive. They represent the fulfillment of an unconscious wish in a sequence of scenes where Adeline is cast as an object of persecutions and desires, excluded from a secure position within the symbolic order and threatened by representatives of this order in the form of violation, barter and murder. As already became evident in the two dreams I presented, the implication of course is that just as all three original fantasies encircle the issue of origins, Adeline’s symptoms equally stage the hysteric’s attraction to an obscene enjoyment of her trauma. As the feminine subject is played out across the three TRIADS OF FANTASY what becomes perturbingly evident is that the romantic hysteric not only suffers from a *maladie par représentation* and from reminiscences but also from a fascination for mortality.

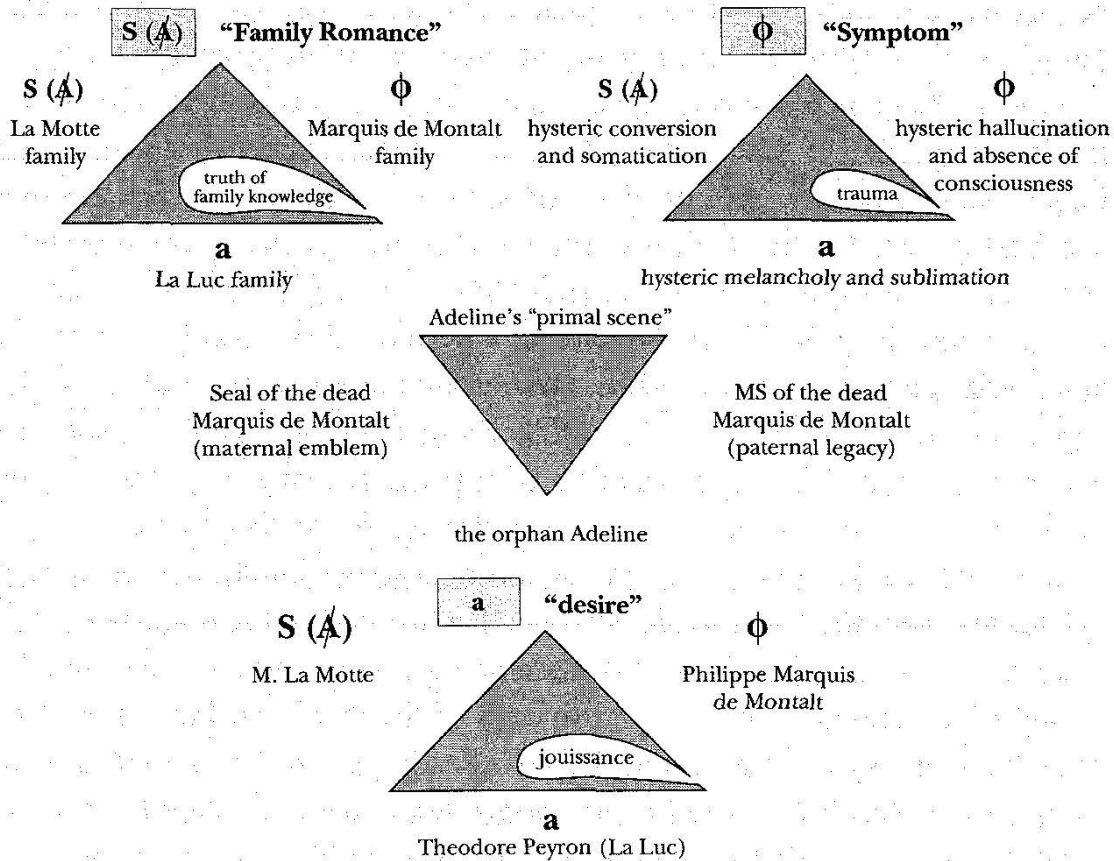
How then, does the *Romance of the Forest* play out these three scenes? The first – the TRIANGLE OF THE FAMILY ROMANCE (which Freud defines as the fantasy of getting free from parents of whom one has a low opinion and replacing them by ones of higher social standing) – stages Adeline’s oscillation between three families, until the chain of surrogate fathers is completed. These substitutions began when, after the murder of her real father, she was given to the lowly Jean d’Aunoy, sent to a convent, given to La Motte, handed over to the Marquis and stolen by Theodore and returned to La Motte, until, upon discovering her real heritage as Marquise de Montalt, she can marry Theodore Peyrou. Within this triangle of the

The Perforated Text of Origins – Radcliffe Camera
 Elisabeth Bronfen

Matrix of Primal Fantasies for the Hysteric Adeline, Heroine of *Romance of the Forest* (1791)



Three Modalities of this Primal Fantasy



FAMILY ROMANCE, the position of the *signifier of the barred Other* (1) is occupied by the La Motte family. Accepting her from the ruffians, they offer her stability and a sense of belonging in the midst of an inconsistent world, where her supposedly natural father has abandoned her and threatens to destroy her. Owing to their debts the La Mottes also lack a fixed position in the symbolic order. At the same time this surrogate family is itself inconsistent given that, even as they protect and help her, they are also willing to sacrifice the surrogate daughter so as to protect their own social status. The La Luc family functions as the *objet a* (2), also a surrogate family, but unconditional and secure in their willingness to accept her as a member. Adeline will ultimately find a coherent closure for her family romance by settling here, in a plenitude one could describe as the imaginary concealment of the impossibility of the family. Yet this community of affection and reason works by virtue of deferral – the father's illness and the son's imprisonment mar the consistency and completion this family promises. If the family of the *barred Other* works on the basis of a dialectic between acceptance and non-acceptance and perpetuates a chain of false family origins, while the family of the *objet a*, offering an ultimate and complete acceptance, leads to the adequate replacement for true origins, the family of the Φ (3) – the Montalt family – functions on the basis of an impossible acceptance, the belated knowledge of origins that are true but irrevocably lost. As I have already shown, Adeline's primal scene is textual. She slowly completes her romantic text of origin as her hysteric hallucinations help her fill in the gaps of a perforated and unsigned paternal manuscript and as the court testimonies during the La Motte trial fill in the gap in the proper attribution of her mother's seal. Yet the family legend that emerges is a terrifying manifestation of trauma, and significantly Adeline faints upon hearing about her mother's premature death and her father's murder by her uncle (346). Her gap in consciousness symptomizes even as it shields her from the lethal archaic knowledge that is about to engulf her. The incest tabu, so crucial to Freud's discussion of both the primal scene and the family romance, can also be found in each of the three families. In the first case, the jealousy of Mme La Motte prevents incest, in the second case M. La Luc's melancholic attachment to his dead wife. In the third case, Adeline's dreams signify an incestual and necrophilic desire for the dead father, which finds its symptomatic manifestation in the figure of the uncle, where seducer and murderer (of the father and potentially of the daughter) fall together – so that once again, we are dealing with an incarnation of lethal, nauseous enjoyment.

My argument then is that the first fantasy, the TRIANGLE OF THE FAMILY ROMANCE shows how the hysteric, subject to a family plot which is barred from her conscious, needs to re-construct the mutilated family legend (which is why I suggest it belongs in the position of the *signifier of the barred Other*). The second triangle, that of SEDUCTION (under the insignia of the *objet a* of desire) stages how the hysteric is determined by her object choices. Again, the figure that allows the hysteric to endure an otherwise inconsistent symbolic network is La Motte, representative of a chain of surrogate fathers that all point to a lack in the symbolic law (the sanctioned murder of Henry de Montalt) even as he is insufficient, "not master of himself" (234). Adeline's phantasmatic desire for him resides in an identification with his melancholy, as this relates to some unexplained loss or crime as well as in an identification with his exile, with his lack of a fixed social position. That is to say she desires him, because he reflects back to her her own inconsistency. Theodore, the incarnation of the *objet a*, in turn, stages the deferral of a consummation of desire. As such he is the imaginary object that sustains the narrative of Adeline's romance, and her phantasmatic desire for him is first as her saviour, then as the lost lover and finally as the wounded lover she must save from the death penalty. Significantly their first meeting is in the forest, while in the mood of "pleasing melancholy" Adeline is singing a sonnet to herself. Unexpectedly he echoes back to her the last stanza and in surprise she sees "a young man in a hunter's dress, leaning against a tree, and gazing on her with that deep attention, which marks an enraptured mind." That is to say, Adeline desires Theodore because he mirrors her own state of the fantasizer. In the course of the novel he incessantly disappears only to suddenly reappear, and thus embodies not a representative of lack, but of the imaginary recuperation always also implied in the loss of an object of desire. Throughout, his importance to her is as a stabilizing nostalgic image of remembrance (135, 208), even if the content of this nostalgia is that he "is lost to her for ever" (208), or suffering terrible tortures in her stead (294). As such, he is the imaginary support against the return of pieces of traumatic repressed material, represented by Philippe de Montalt, embodying the position of the Φ in this TRIANGULATION OF DESIRE. The Marquis is the politically powerful, dangerous but fascinating object. Given that within the phantasmatic scenario projected onto Philippe he threatens to engulf Adeline in an obscene enjoyment of lethal desire, Adeline significantly symptomizes her response to his seduction by fainting when the Marquis enters, by succumbing to fits of anxiety when he remains in her proximity and finally fleeing from his presence.

The crucial point, however, is that all three figures of masculinity are interlinked – Theodore, as a soldier in the Marquis' troop, is in fact his representative, carrying out his commands; La Motte, under obligation to the Marquis owing to his crime, is willing to engage in a pact with him, and he too carries out his commands. The pattern for this enmeshment is set up in the scene where the Marquis first appears in Adeline's field of vision. At the moment that he enters the abbey, Adeline faints, and her beauty "touched with the languid delicacy of illness ... the negligence of her dress, loosened for the purpose of freer respiration" becomes the object upon which "he gazed with an eager admiration, which seemed to absorb all the faculties of his mind" while she experiences an absence, a gap in consciousness. It is, however, only once Theodore also approaches Adeline, and gazes at her compassionately that she revives, "and saw him, the first object that met her eyes, bending over her in silent anxiety" (87f.). Only then does La Motte enter, discover in the Marquis the man he had assailed, and he consents to support him in a plot to seduce Adeline. A similar configuration is repeated in the scene where Adeline, fleeing from a terrifying vision of the inebriated Marquis – one could say staging obscene desire par excellence – finds herself in the garden beyond the villa pursued by an unknown man and falls senseless to the ground, only to wake up finding herself in the arms of Theodore. With these sequences, I want to argue, Radcliffe deconstructs the fantasy scenes of her hysteric heroine to reveal how the inconsistent surrogate father carries out the mandate of the perverse father and how the satisfactory lover is merely the imaginary concealment of impossible, traumatic desire.

Though the break-through of traumatic enjoyment will ultimately be screened out, a trace of this agent of wounding remains. When Adeline recovers the history of her father, she does so by discovering that he was the murder-victim of Philippe de Montalt. By accepting Theodore as a husband, she chooses the victim of the Marquis' revenge. Thus, as these three figures of masculinity modulate the traumatic effects of desire, they do so in connection with a threat of mutilation. One could say, these FANTASIES OF SEDUCTION rework the scene Freud labeled "a child is being beaten." I want to suggest that, in relation to the impotent father, Adeline fantasizes an identification with his lack in social position, to form the scene "I am like my surrogate father, who is being punished by a barred paternal Other," a fantasy that in a sense merely repeats her hallucinations about the torture of her real father. In relation to the object of imaginary plenitude, her fantasy is that she will wound him, and here the scenario can be labeled "an object of

desire satisfies me because I am the spectator of its mutilation.” Finally in relation to the obscene father, Adeline’s fantasy is the masochistic scene “my surrogate father will mutilate me.”

The fantasy of mutilation connects desire to the last triangle – under the *insignia* Φ – illustrating the hysteric’s SYMPTOMS. The issue of origins at stake here is the emergence of sexual difference, which produces an indecision on the part of the hysteric as to how she wishes to position herself in relation to castration – “do I accept my castration as a woman, do I remain masculine, do I oscillate between these options?” In these fantasy scenes the hysteric subject is constituted through her engagement with trauma, whereby her symptoms either mark the return of the repressed or its conversion. All aspects of Adeline’s psychosomatic conversion, I suggest, are symptoms that serve a stability in the midst of inconsistency, an insufficiency emerging from her sense of being an abandoned orphan. These hysteric conversions can be divided into fits of nervous excitability or fits of enfeeblement. Either the *barring of the Other* induces Adeline to wander along the corridors of the abbey (in analogy, perhaps to the hysterical wandering of the uterus), seeking explanations for the anxiety that overcomes her, or to flee repeatedly from her various persecutors. Anxiety attacks, however, also result in fits of tears, languor, pallor, listlessness and fever to the point of paralysis. Once again Radcliffe offers an image of the hysteric, suffering from a *maladie par représentation*. Just after Adeline has been taken in by Peter’s relatives in Savoy, the mutual support and protection she finds there forces her to reflect upon her own state of forlornness so intensively that she produces feverish symptoms (242f.), becomes delirious and sinks into a state of stupefaction. This somatic helplessness is a hysterical conversion of her psychic vulnerability, turning the representation impressed in her unconscious into body-image. Significantly, she awakes from her coma to find herself in the La Luc household, in the midst of her imaginary family of plenitude.

At the same time, her hysteric suggestibility allows her to respond both to the sublimity of nature and the horror invoked by the abbey. The former evokes singing, composition and recitation of poetry, as well as melancholic day-dreams. These SYMPTOMS, I suggest, belong under the aegis of the *objet a*, given that they are soothing imaginary concealments of trauma. Nostalgic in essence, these symptoms allow her to enjoy loss and the deferral of her desire. If, in *conversion*, the repressed returns in a distorted manner, and if in *sublimation*, the traumatic material is directed toward new non-traumatic objects, so that both symptoms offer a mitigating compromise of sorts, the

last set of SYMPTOMS, Adeline's absences (gaps in consciousness), her nightmares and her hallucinations stage how a *foreclosure of trauma* engenders its reappearance in the real. These symptoms are produced when her impressionable imagination is drawn to horror, and they occur under the SIGN OF THE Φ , given that they stage the encroachment of trauma on the subject. While *conversion* and *sublimation* signify lack, these *psychic absences* show that what is at stake is precisely the lack of a signifier, where the subject threatens to be engulfed by the traumatic gap of jouissance.

Materializing belatedly the two dreams I have already discussed, these hallucinations either involve a MASOCHISTIC FANTASY SCENE, revolving around the finding and reading of the perforated manuscript, where the fantasizer is herself drawn towards mortality through the image of the dying father. The pattern that emerges is the following. Like a sleepwalker – for during these scenes her conscious reason is absent and these peregrinations often terminate in senselessness – Adeline explores the abbey at night, finds and later reads the manuscript and fills in the gaps she finds there with the voices and images of her own hallucinations. One could say, the dark chamber corresponds to the psychic apparatus, and by virtue of her hysteric *maladie par représentation* she develops the mnemonic traces she finds there into images of her father's agony. During these scenes she experiences complete alterity, and fears looking into a mirror “lest some other face than her own should meet her eyes” (134). Or her hallucinations involve a SADISTIC FANTASY SCENE, where she in turn thrills herself by drawing mortality in the image of the tortured body of Theodore, loaded with chains, pale with sickness and grief, bleeding, in vain calling her name (194, 217), and finally at the place of execution, “pale and convulsed in death.” At one point, locked once again into a dark chamber “the image of Theodore, dying by the hands of the Marquis, now rose to her imagination, and the terrors of suspense became almost insupportable ... amidst the tumult ... she clearly distinguished deep groans. This confirmation of her fears deprived her of all her remaining spirits, and growing faint, she sunk almost lifeless into a chair” (196) – a fantasy scene par excellence of obscene lethal enjoyment.

Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* illustrates that at the origin of her hysteric's trauma lies the death of the father, which is only retrievable as a fantasy, and this ORIGINAL FANTASY modulates into an EXCHANGE WITH SURROGATE FIGURES OF PATERNITY, into an OBSCENE DESIRE FOR MUTILATION but also into an ACT OF SELF-PROGENATION. At the end of the trial Adeline has given symbolic birth to her real father, disclosing his manuscript and burying his skeleton in the family vault. She has given birth

to herself as the Montalt heir and given birth to Theodore, whom disclosure of her parentage first saves from execution and then from persecution by the law. This is possibly a specifically feminine version of the family romance, where the transition from low to high parents is attained over a sublation of paternity.

This leads to the second conclusion I would like to draw. Within a text, where anxiety and desire are articulated in response to masculinity, an undercurrent of maternal longing calmly sustains the hysteric's histrionic turbulences. For in a sense Adeline always had the knowledge of her heritage, her text or origins, namely in the form of her mother's insignia – the seal. Thus the one stable signifier is attached to the signature of her real mother and the gift of her surrogate mother d'Aunoy. This insignia is neither an object of fascination, like the abbey or the manuscript, nor does it need to be repressed and return as an object of hallucination. The cherished object was simply always there. As counterpoint to the economy of repression and conversion revolving around her paternal legacy, the maternal signature points to an origin for which the hysteric needs to produce no representations, because her gap in knowledge induces neither anxiety nor desire. Adeline hesitates taking the miniature of her mother when it is finally shown to her. The archaic knowledge pertaining to her maternal legacy is so intimate a possession that it requires neither repression, substitution nor conversion. But then, it also requires no fantasy scenes and thus no narratives.

Zizek admonishes us that we should learn to love our symptoms, because these bind enjoyment to a symbolic formation which assures consistency and helps avoid being swallowed up by trauma. The point worth emphasizing is that, as the hysteric Adeline finally arrives at the fantasy scene of marriage, she does so by moving from masochism to sadism, from the dream of her own wounded body, of dislocation and paternal threat to the dream of her father's mortality as this enmeshes with her lover's mutilation. The way her heroine can organize her enjoyment to utmost satisfaction without the threat of being engulfed by it, is the narrative of a family romance where abandonment is exchanged for autogenesis, in the act of finding and re-writing the mutilated family legend, whose gaps were filled with pieces from the pool of her archaic desire. Pointing to but not touching an originary trauma (on the paternal side) and sustained by a silent, non-converted signature (on the maternal side), Radcliffe's romantic hysteric offers us, as belated readers, her own perforated narrative, whose fascination I have tried

to convert into another fantasy scene – that of THEORY – exploring, but hopefully not closing its gaps.

Works Cited

- Freud, Sigmund. "On the Psychological Mechanism of Hysterical Phenomena: A Lecture." *The Standard Edition III*. London: Hogarth Press, 1962. 27-39.
- . "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming." *The Standard Edition IX*. London: Hogarth Press, 1959. 143-153.
- . "Hysterical Fantasies and their Relation to Bisexuality." *The Standard Edition IX*. London: Hogarth Press, 1959. 159-166.
- . "Some General Remarks on Hysterical Attacks." *The Standard Edition IX*. London: Hogarth Press, 1959. 229-234.
- . "Family Romances." *The Standard Edition IX*. London: Hogarth Press, 1959. 237-241.
- . *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis. The Standard Edition XVI*. London: Hogarth Press, 1963.
- . "'A Child is Being Beaten': A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Sexual Perversions." *The Standard Edition XVII*. London: Hogarth Press, 1955. 179-204.
- Janet, Pierre. *L'état mental des hystériques*. Paris: Alcan, 1894.
- Langbauer, Laurie. *Women and Romance: The Consolations of Gender in the English Novel*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990.
- Laplanche, J. and J.-B. Pontalis. "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality." *Formations of Fantasy*. Ed. Victor Burgin, James Donald, Cora Kaplan. London: Methuen, 1986.
- . *The Language of Psychoanalysis*. London: Karnac Books, 1988.
- Massé, Michelle A. *In the Name of Love: Women, Masochism, and the Gothic*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992.
- Modleski, Tania. *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-produced Fantasies for Women*. London: Methuen, 1982.
- Radcliffe, Ann. *The Romance of the Forest*. Ed. Chloe Chard. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Zizek, Slavoj. *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991.