

## *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man:* The Creative Art of Lacanian Letter inbetween the Real and the Symbolic\*

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Yu, Myongja. “*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man: The Creative Art of Lacanian Letter inbetween the Real and the Symbolic.*” *Studies in English Language & Literature* 46.4 (2020): 59-74. This paper explores the world of the Lacanian letter in relationship with its presence in Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. His novel draws our attention to the correlation between the narrative and letter-ness of the ‘portrait’ in question. The letter’s role in the narrative creation is primordial for not only that is the cause-well of the creation but also the entrance of the characters who possess the letter and their respective exit, such as in the Walz, deprived of that letter constitute the very narrative web. According to Lacan, as does Joyce himself, this letter reveals itself as the ‘litter,’ the remnant objet on the shore of the Real, the gap. The more accurate location of that shore is, in fact, the overlapped inbetween the Real and the Symbolic, where, amongst others, the indescribable Real under the manifesting fractal forms of Subject, existence, *cogito*, objet *a*, drive, and other more reside. Therefore, one can discover that Joyce’s narrative strategy was, though unaware of Lacanian letter, to locate his young protagonist, Stephen Dedalus, in that place of inbetween, let him dwell there and become the letter itself, a bird-letter-man. Likewise, the letter’s multiformity opens the era of the ‘letter *a*’ after the objet *a*. Furthermore, we go from the letter directly to the creation mechanism for the imagination is living out of the letter-Real; The vicissitude itself of his letter constructs the narrative fabric as Lacan showed us. (Kyungpook National University)

**Key Words:** Lacan, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ‘letter *a*,’ inbetween, ‘signifiçence’

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## I. Introduction

*A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man*(1916 Hensforth *Portrait*) has, according to the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, brought James Joyce(1882~1941) the title of one of the greatest *bildungsroman* writers in the English language whose international predecessors include J. W. von Goethe(*Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* 1795), Charlotte Brontë(*Jane Eyre* 1847) along with Charles Dickens(*David Copperfield* 1850). After trying his first novel *Stephen Hero*(1944 Hensforth *Hero*) out, he wrote *Portrait* as if he writes it on the basis of the *Hero*. Therefore, it is evident that *Portrait's* composition technique and device without mentioning the protagonist's attitude before his life look more mature and far more well developed in complexity.

This time, Joyce no more narrates too directly, down to earth, as in the traditional prose works trying even his first stream of consciousness device. He does not treat women just as inferior to men as well, and instead, a young woman is at the center of the subliminal epiphany of the novel. Above all, he knows exactly what his protagonist was going to become in his life. The latter found his vocation as a writer and became sure of his duty and glory in the future. This inner certainty and pride as a young artist play out in the writer's choice of the mythic character, Dedalus, and his episode in the labyrinth throughout the novel's whole structure, thereby rendering the work sophisticatedly complicated double scaffolding of narration, differentiating itself definitely from the previous novel.

This usage of the mythic narrative source of Dedalus imprisoned in a labyrinth and the word 'portrait' is critical for this paper because it provides the readers with good instances of Lacanian letters in the narrative creation. I designed the present paper as the subsequent research of our previous essay, "*The Picture of Dorian Gray*(Hensforth *PDG*): In Search of the Pure Signifiant," which has the portrait as the starting element of the Lacanian letter outlined in the "*Seminar on the 'Purloined Letter'*" of *Écrits*(1966). It has remained interesting to carry another study out with another novel containing the same word portrait to examine other more varied

aspects of the letter's role in the artistic creation to enrich the letter research. Therefore, as a follow-up to the first research, this paper will continue to explore the world of Lacanian letters in *Portrait*, comparing its results with those of our old investigation. The usual topics of the research of *Portrait* touched Ireland nationalism under the colonization of England, the issues of the modification in the artist's roman(Oh Kil-Young), the stream of conscience, the imageries of the cow, wave, bird, or the wave structure of the novel(Park Sung-Hee). But there is almost no research on *Portrait* as we apply the Lacanian letter theory and the concept of the subject in the context of the German Idealism. The main points to the research of this paper are as follows.

Firstly, the concept of letter and signifiant will be studied anew further, at present, in light of Lacan's gap conception displayed in his *Seminar(S XI Chapter 2)*.<sup>1</sup> His assertion of the gap as the unconscious and the Real at whose center sits the object *a* has inspired many prominent scholars in such a propitious way that Žižek could show how those theoretic joints on spirit and subject link each other intimately in between the German Idealism, Kant with Hegel, Descartes and the Lacanian subject discourse. It is well known too that the six years(1933~1939) Lacan participated in Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit* lecture at the 'École Normale Supérieure'(Higher Teacher Training Collage) in Paris by Kojève(Alexander Kojève 1902~1968) was an intellectual turning point for Lacan.

Žižek, in *Tarrying with the Negative*(1993) and *The Ticklish Subject*(1999), articulates abundantly how the otherwise viewed as the primeval gap inbetween area of the topologically opposite domains of the human spirit was once still genuinely discovered but covered to be rediscovered in turn by Descartes, Kant and Hegel along with Lacan. Žižek, in *Tarrying with the Negative*, asserts that Kant, for example, replaced the void of the *cogito* subject with 'res cogitans(the thinking, the thinking one).'

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<sup>1</sup> We use both French and English version of *Seminar XI* by Lacan. The former is abbreviated as *S XI* and the latter, *Sem XI*.

He[Descartes] wrongly concludes that, in the empty “I think” which accompanies every representation of an object, we get hold of a positive phenomenal entity, *res cogitans* (a “small piece of the world,” as Husserl put it), which thinks and is transparent to itself in its capacity to think. (13)

Žižek further puts his finger on the critical issue of the Kantian categorization of the noumenal and phenomenal world. “Kant himself commits an error when, in his *Critique of Practical Reason*, he conceives of freedom (the postulate of practical reason) as a noumenal Thing.”(15) Hegel is then the radicalizer of Kantian thoughts: “[Kant] remains thoroughly Kantian in his insistence on the irreducible gap that separates discursive intellect (the level of the Notion) from intuition. Far from simply healing the Kantian split, Hegel even radicalizes it.”(19) Likewise, suffice it to say that Žižek, although indirectly, positively evaluates Kant’s contribution to the subject notion relatively washed away in the poststructuralism psychoanalysis. (Fink 1997 35)

Lacan for his part puts forward implicitly that this inbetween evolves by Kant as a gap of the originary cause (*S XI 24*) but is, as it is revealed again further by Žižek as well, sliced out and then reinserted inbetween the two opposite lieux. In this context, the topic of inbetween here should be approached as an ontological question but not a problem of choice or mere comparison. The inbetween gains its value in that it can function for the spirit as a mediator to resist the harsh domination of reality of the symbolic order and help the subject attain freedom.

Secondly, we will survey Lacan’s opinion on the inbetween gap in the relationship to the unconscious and the Real. What this paper interests here is that the author determined in the previous essay series the Lacanian letter as objet *a* and placed it inbetween the Real and the symbolic order of Lacan as it was then the logical developmental course of the signifiants. (Yu 2019, 95) The author further tried to prove that the Lacanian letter, as other many objet *as*, promotes the self to find his/her subjectivity getting to the freedom of mind and could play as an agency for/of the creative activity. All these are now once more validated thanks to

philosophical research. It seems logical that Lacan's statements on the inbetween space, gap, split and hole, and more should gain more attention.

Thirdly, we try to find more ways the letter and the inbetween play out to manage new gap spaces and their agencies to reach the subjectivization. The genealogy of the gap established by Žižek, this paper's objective will be no other than to spot the very whereabouts of the gap: Becoming the gap, identify oneself in the gap. However, the way forward to employ it still rests in question. To this end, here comes Joyce's Stephen, whose innovative inbetween strategy will be analyzed in this paper. To undertake the study, we will briefly summarize the letter's characteristics without too much repeating those already discussed in the first essay, and Lacanian inbetween and then start investigating the aspects of letter/signifiant in *Portrait*.

## **II. Lacanian Letter inbetween the Real and the Symbolic**

The early Egyptian hieroglyph is a good instance of Lacanian letter: it is the subset of the signifiant. The letter's characteristics in comparison to the signifiant are the materiality, visibility, and self-repetition. There is no meaning fixable what so ever: Even though visible and extendable, it is as if one's eyes can not see them like they are not there. Despite the visible and recognizable form, one can not see anything sure. They are like the Chinese opened before people of different letter culture. They are pseudo-letters or even patterns, forms, and graffiti on the wall. In this respect, what makes a letter a Lacanian letter theoretically does not lie in the outer form only, but its "méconnaissance" (no knowledge *S XI*), indefiniteness, and the impossibility of meaning and sound as they can become nothing/anything/void between alphabet or drawing/picture. Its betweenness is only mysterious and Freudian '*unheimlich*'(uncanny).

Regarding the signifiant, the signifier in Saussurian manner cannot be translated

as Lacanian signifiant because all the signifiants do not refer to meaning. The signifiant in French should remain unchanged even in English translation too. The noun word 'signifier' in English is very tricky because the same spelling means in French a verb standing for 'signify/mean.' As remarked above, the English set of signified/signifier cannot for Lacan be translated directly as French 'signifié/signifiant(not always related to the meaning).' Lacan, therefore would not choose the English word signifier due to the possible confusion of pronunciation and meaning. It seems that is why Lacan prefers 'signe'(sign) for the English word signifier(containing meaning) instead of neither 'signifiant' or 'signifier'(both French) nor signifier(English). There is a passage where the difference between signifier and signifiant is by chance highlighted, showing the translation if Lacan's terms are as ticklish as the Subject is. Lacan once says mentioning the case of Anna O as follows:

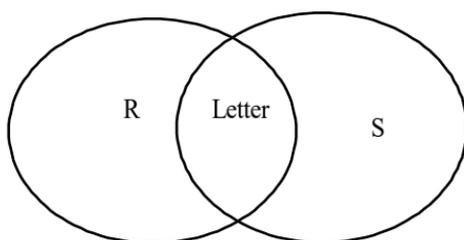
At this level, they[signs] are not signifiers[signifiants], for the nervous pregnancy is a symptom, and, according to the definition of the sign, something intended for someone. The signifier[signifiant], being something quite different, represents a subject for another signifier[signifiant]. (*Sem XI* 157. Parts in [ ] by the author)

A ce niveau, ce ne sont pas des signifiants. car le faux ballon est un symptôme, et, selon la définition du signe, quelque chose pour quelqu'un. Le signifiant, étant tout autre chose, représente un sujet pour un autre signifiant. (*S XI* 144)

'Signe' translates into the sign, but it is here better to let 'signifiant' unchanged as done usually. Otherwise, the first sentence would imply, "At this level, signifiers are not signifiers," comprehending differently from what Lacan wanted to indicate: "At this level, signs are not the signifiants."

The clothes of the emperor naked have no signifier, sign, or letter but signifiant. In contrast with the letter or sign, the signifiant would be characterized by the doubleness, for instance, the visible/invisible, meaning/ meaningless or sound/silence.

The signifiant goes to draw something which is a void but at the same time 'non-absence-of-being/thing.' Likewise, there is a signifiant when a meaningful (in)visible movement occurs in any structural site of the signifiant as a pure difference between the twos. For signifiants operate in pair, 'a signifiant for the other signifiant' with slit inception in between. We now extend the survey field keeping up with Lacan's conception of the gap as the unconscious and its relatedness to the Real.



Lacan also compared letters to the litters scattered on the littoral of the Real as objet *a*, a thing that takes the place of the metonymical fragment of the Other(language, parents, or Mentors, for instance). One has always some missing feeling from the birth. He wants to cover that emptiness with some small calming objets invoking the Other/mother absent: Scarf, purse or hair pin for instance. Those objet *as* are Real but represented in the reality.

As already specified, the letter belongs to the inbetween the Real(R) and the Symbolic(S) like in the diagram. As to the inbetween space, he in 1964 connects the unconscious in a new fashion, namely, to Kant's gap conception. Its properties are among others "unanalyzable - impossible to understand" just like the unconscious and Real.

It is certainly not enough to say that the unconscious is a dynamic concept (...) In that essay[*An Attempt to introduce the Concept of Negative Quantities into Philosophy*], it is more or less stated that cause is a concept that, in the last resort, is unanalysable - impossible to understand by reason - if indeed the rule of reason, the

*Vernunftsregel*, is always some *Vergleichung*, or equivalent - and that there remains essentially in the function of cause a certain *gap*, a term used by Kant in the *Prolegomena*. (*Sem XI 21*)

D. Evans in his *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*(1996) informs us about Lacan's causality "between the symbolic and the real"(24). This gap(*S XI 21, 24, 25, 31*) has numerous twin words such as "split"(25, 27, 28, 29), "interval"(25) "rupture"(28), "hole"(25), "impediment"(27), "oscillate"(25), "slit"(33), and even "something of malfunction."

For Lacan, the unconscious has an open gap space, just as it does the Kantian cause. He then emphasizes the place of the unconscious as well.

Well! It is at this point that I am trying to make you see by approximation that the Freudian unconscious is situated at that point, where, between cause and that which it affects, there is always something wrong[malfunction]. (*Sem XI 22*)

Right after this passage, he continues to proceed to the Real whose birth is seen from that openness and goes to occupy its particular lieu, which is the kernel of the Lacanian conception of the gap.

For what the unconscious does is to show us the gap through which neurosis recreates a harmony with[connect him/herself to] a real - a real that may well not be determined. (*Sem XI 22*)

The neurosis, meaning us, connect ourselves to a Real thanks to the unconscious who allowed us to witness that novel state, the Real, the indeterminable because felt missing. The budding Real with maybe wriggles or something looks even exciting as it would do any creation even though it is technically something inconceivable. As itself a gap, it further gives birth to another gap, multiple gaps. To this extent, when this Real meets the Symbolic after that, there creates an overlapped interspace, as

shown in the above diagram: this becomes the so-called hole in the symbolic, making it lack, incomplete, and limping. It goes without saying that all this arrangement in stages of the explication does not mean they occur precisely one after the other, but it is just for straightforward clarification.

Here lay thus the profound significance of this rounded diamond losange superimposed area because it, as almost nothing(undefinable, monster) but still at the same time not which is nothing only, it can stop the stringent symbolic world and lead to the collapse of the grim and oppressive reality. Let us remember that the Lacanian letter situating in this same area can also perform the same creative act in a similar way. Moreover, that revolutionary invention is precisely what Joyce, aware or not, undertake with his letters received from the Greek craftsman Dedalus in his *Portrait*.

### **III. Letter in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man***

'Be the gap, dwell in the gap': this is the epigram of Joyce writing Stephen's tale. The origin/world is a gap/split, and the Lacanian subject, the Real we can find, and objet *a*, too, reside there. Inspired by Dedalus, his mentor, Stephen decides to be a letter, and he goes directly into the society, a letter labyrinth for him. From the beginning, he appears as a mythic animal character, a 'moocow'; it, therefore, insinuates that he is going to become a sacrificial offering cow for his family and society. This cow even encounters a beautiful baby, the protagonist himself. This arrangement is very psychologically symbolic: the man who narrates this story of a cow, a baby, named Tuckoo, and a woman called Betty Byrn is his father. That means his destiny is as if already made by the blessing of his father, the Other. Of course, this cow is the prelude element for the coming mythic figure of Minator, a man of half cow, half-human. A Labyrinth is neither a letter nor a painting, just as Minotaur is a half-half creature. They are all the crazy uncanny in-betweenness of

nothing/both/all. Joyce starts his story with an answer already found: a letter-man to break through the grim situation of his life. Fly over the letter-nest to escape far from his hometown was his strategy.

It seems he knew that the labyrinth of his society is, in fact, the unconscious where he could find the Real of inbetween and create a more wonderful world of his own. Dedalus and Stephen both, in fact, half voluntarily enter into the labyrinth-prison to brute their plan with plenty of objet *a* there. It is no prison for them; On the contrary, a comfortable unconscious atelier of Real where creation is every day's menu. He was aware of this fact, subsequently, his love for his town and family. They were the stone ingredients: object 'a' such as letter, of a great alchemist like him. It looks then somewhat insipid because he could further live on his country's rich field, achieve the goal promised initially, and be happy forever. The reader asks himself: What is the writer's intention? What does he plan to show us specifically in this story? The answer is already in his hand; the process of escape grows in value.

The most crucial process points of the story's plot are the moment he refuses his vocation for the priesthood and the time point when he notices a letter form, "a quaint device"(142) as his face portrait. The refuse for the priesthood is vital because it is at this point he traverses his fantasy of the Other, the director priest of Clongowes school. The priests don't know how he despises their profession in his mind, and he has not entirely overcome the charm of the flesh. But they seem blind to see through a young man's inner mind: Stephen would have felt they could not keep up with him. He lost his interest in their daily religious actions. He now could go in full heart his way. From this moment arises an uncertain letter pattern, "a quaint device of the medieval book"(142) of a portrait before him to accompany and obey.

A hawk-like man is the third way, an objet *a*, arisen in the inbetween prison. Dedalus and Stephen had to enter into that third world, which was noman's land, a Real territory. It is incessantly moving, remodeling, and boiling. There suffice it to

wait to rise a letter automatically because it is abundant with Lacanian letter to boost the artist to the land of creation. Stephen acknowledged the letter assigned to him, and now he has to finish his creative act. It comes true in the form of an encounter with a young girl.

The girl on the beach is another bird-human, his female alter ego, double. Their reciprocal recognition was immediate. "(...) an emerald trail of seaweed had fashioned itself as a sign upon the flesh"(212). There are several cases of objet *a* such as the 'emerald trail of seaweed' where a daily objet becomes a Lacanian objet *a* of the inbetween urging the imaginative idea. We have said that the objet *a* concerns the replacing small, almost meaningless thing invoking the Other absent. That is why the objet *a* has something to do with imagination because one begins to imagine (the Other) in automatic style when he discovers that objet *a* for him. It becomes the most potent imagination as it ultimately joins the deepest phallic desire. Even without the modern psychological knowledge, it is surprising that Hegel refers to that sort of fragments of the objects in his "Jenaer Realphilosophie"(Jena Real Philosophy) cited in *The Ticklish Subject*.

This night, the interior of nature, that exists here - pure self - in phantasmagorical representations, is night all around it, in which here shoots a bloody head - there another white ghastly apparition, suddenly here before it, and just do disappears. one catches sight of this night when one looks human beings in the eye - into a night that becomes awful. (30)

Žižek comments that night as the night where the objet *a* appears in bloody imagination. Imagination is here witnessing the metonymical partial parts of the mOther, objets *a*.

Ultimately, imagination stands for the capacity of our mind to dismember what immediate perception puts together, to 'abstract' not a common notion but a certain feature from other features. To 'imagine' means to imagine a partial object without its body, a colour without shape, a shape without a body: 'here a bloody head - there

another white ghastly apparition.' This 'night of the world' is thus transcendental imagination at its most elementary and violent. (30)

Žižek appears to pay his attention too heavily to the partial bloody things while its real agency, the Other, looks overlooked. The Real, objet *a*, the subject stand all in the inbetween gap: The world is a gap - In the beginning, there was 'gap.' We can see by the way Lacan may have taken his term 'Real' from Hegelian reading especially with Kojève. Besides imaginary faculty, the objet *a* functions as the bite of the desire: The desire is born when the subject and the objet *a* face each other as seen in the Lacanian Fantasy formula.

Her eyes 'calling him' and their regards cross away in a dreamy atmosphere.

Long, long she suffered his gaze (...) Her image had passed into his soul for ever and no word had broken the holy silence of his ecstasy. Her eyes had called him and his soul had leaped at the call. To live, to err, to fall, to triumph, to recreate life out of life! A wild angel had appeared to him (...). (212~13)

As the perfect representation of the mOther, the Other, a goddess of the beauty, she sends him motherly regard by which he at once transcends to the world of God, the perfect Other. He tastes the instance of Jouissance pure, which obliges the apparition of the same pure light. All are gone; they too disappear in the floating warm swirl of light, one of the indescribable Real. He is in Real, touches the Real, becomes a Real, nothing. However, his feeling of the Nirvana is indisputably true as if he became an cephalic body. That is how he can apply the strategic epigram for the creation, 'Become the gap, Dwell in the gap.'

Once get crossed that sort of enlightenment, epiphany, according to Joyce, the letter get to the other dimension which is the one of signifiant, full-of-void. The letter of that inbetween performs as the mediator guiding Stephen through the passage from one to the other dimension. The non-sens of the letter followed by the full void-ness of the signifiant in pure enlighting frees himself from the earthy affair

with surety of his own life forth. Yun Hee-Whan argues that epiphany by Joyce is not accurately the same one as by Th. Aquinas, yet one knows that Joyce wanted to get inspired without, nonetheless, precisely tracing Aquinas' footsteps. For us, it concerns more of a signifiant-light experience than the epiphany. The man with an epiphany of enlightening signifiant can live, love, and create or not. Everything becomes all right.

#### **IV. The implication of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man***

Both *PDG* by Oscar Wilde and *Portrait* use the portrait(picture) as varieties of Lacanian letter. The picture, portrait, and letter in their works reveal the connection. Joyce gave the reader a clue that the picture/portrait in question is a variety of Lacanian letter by putting an indefinite article, a, rather than a definite one. Unlike the *PDG*, *Portrait* registers more devices for the sublimation in the enlightening act. In the former, the reader has to invoke more imagination to comprehend the disappearing of all letter and characters in the explosion of light, including the letter-portrait reaching the level of the Real, fullness of nothing. In the *PDG*, the disappearance of Henry expresses that stage.

In contrast to this, in the *Portrait*, the light enveloping the protagonist is accurately present as the sublimation's principal agency. This void, brilliant immersing light, this non-names but not without nothing is Stephen's Subject through which he can regard himself, also filled, bright emptiness. Joyce was very ingenious in that he has already known that the Dedalus way was his as well to invent his real subject.

Only when the Subject, accompanied and illuminated by the filled vacancy of his letter-non-sens, can attain the enlightening of the subject unveiled in the final light claritas-signifiant dimension which is void but not-without-nothing. In this way, indeed, he could find his Subject; After that encountering with his real subject in the

Epiphany, he can now write his subject story or other storytelling. In this clarifying respect, *The Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James inhabit the same sort of critical inner light-moment. It would be interesting to zoom it out and compare with other study results so far.

In this way, the instant Stephen finds his Subject is the mortal point of the total vacuum moment. The time the protagonist embraces the absolute void-ness of the Subject is a fleeting instant of non-sens(meaning) when the symbolic operation of the Other all stops at all. In this regard, in French neologism, I would like to call it, as there is no English word for it, the instant of 'signifiance'([sɪnɪfjã : s] emphasis by the author) following the spirit of J. Derrida's 'différance.' He replaced the 'e' with 'a' to indicate the incessant movement of the signifiers in time. Mine functions in somewhat other direction: I replace 'a' with 'e' of the French, 'signifiance'(의미화 the signifying action) to register the stopping of the act signifiance. This zero point of signifiant would register in the same line of the "Writing degree zero" by R. Barthes. The stillness, disappearing away of the signifier chain, is called the moment of 'signifiance.'

As shown, the letter has such vast application cases of the Real, the unknowable impossible. Lacan offered us the letter in the important, the very first article of his *Écrits* beside the existing concept of the objet *a*. A question emerges: Which one is the subset of the other? Letters seem more numerous, anonymous, due to a sort of empty envelope than the objet *a*, which, in reality, is still mostly recognizable regardless of its signifiance. Letters cover a wider area than the objet *a*, so a new group of 'letter *a* will begin for the *a* was always already a letter, *a*. We can be more aware of the reason why Lacan put so much importance on his article on the 'purloined letter' presenting it at the head of his *Écrits*. One can see almost all the narratives inhabit each a letter playing as the driving power hub, "the pulsation of the unconscious"(S XI 141), which is non-other than the very unconscious of the text. The creation mechanism starting from that hub will, then, be the next topic of our investigation.

Contrary to the common interpretation, I do not think Joyce left his country because he hated it only. His motherland itself may have been an inbetween land for him with its meanders and paradoxes impenetrable like the Real for a young man. It was, in this way, his treasure house of the Real ingredients for creation. There was only one thing to effectuate to perfect his grand creative design as a whole: the labyrinth was to fly over. That is to say that the letter in the inbetween area is a kind of mediator. The Subject should go through the passage with the letter to let it go just as the cocoon after the butterfly flew out away. As illustrated above, that was his way of separation from “the vanishing mediator” (Žižek 1993, 33), the letter-signifiant aiming now at the creation. That was the imperative way to reach the next dimension of the signifiant for a young man as the artist to come.

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