

the affair of the secretary and the psychoanalyst¹

*Peter Gunn*²

What place does the secretary have in a school of psychoanalysis? After all, the term suggests one who acts as no more than support for the authority of another. There is of course a place for such a functionary in many an administration. Even in a school of psychoanalysis this cannot be avoided.

With all the electronic devices which are now available the function of the secretary might be thought to be fading, at least to the extent that there is a need for this function to be embodied. But I have in mind here a creature who I believe still exists: the *private* secretary.

Let us, for the sake of my argument, suppose that this creature is a woman. Does not the scene of this woman in the company of her bigwig (the latter being, we can correspondingly suppose, a man) recall the arrangement of the analyst with his analysand? We are talking after all about someone who takes her place at a certain remove from, but yet in close proximity to, an other.

This too is a proximity which is both exclusive and confidential. Here also only two can be present and there is, on the part of one, the maintenance of an efficacious intimacy. There is an intimacy, but it is one which bears on what can be known.³

It is only by this separated but nevertheless intimate proximity, only by her *presence*, that the private secretary is enabled to attend to the speech of the other in the *time* of that other. It is in this way that she is, in the most significant sense, efficacious; by her presence she has *effects*.

In saying this however could we not also be talking of a love affair? In such an affair there are certainly bodies. And here too the attention given is exclusive, the exclusion functioning not only to bar others but to circumscribe a domain of knowledge. This exclusive domain is secret. And it is this which serves to provide those two with some semblance of unity, albeit one which is often shaky.

We know how easily the administrative assistant slides into the administrator's arms. Nor should we be surprised by this. The erotic is endemic to such a scene. Any arrangement involving the presence of these two, the woman and the man, under conditions of exclusion, is liable to this.

I take it however that the relation between the secretary and her patron has the formality of a pact. And yet, though constrained in this way, is not this arrangement, just because it is both closeted and formal, nevertheless rather unstable?

This pact, if it is to be kept, must hold to the tension which results from what we might call the formalisation of the erotic. This is the formality established when exclusion is made the condition of the attention which is given to the other sex. This exclusion holds presence to a certain distance by setting terms for that encounter by reference to speech and time. In this formality it is necessary, we could say, that the romance of attention is rather spoiled. How fine a romance is it possible for attention to cultivate when formality is made the very basis of its provision?

In order to investigate further this connection between the secretary and the psychoanalyst I want to turn now to a conception of the function of secretary whose history predates the present day.

I will begin however by quoting the words of someone who has only recently dropped out of history. This is someone who was both a bigwig in his own right but who also claimed to occupy a position known as secretary. He fell, as it were, between two stools. Here are his words:

As we know, there are known knowns, there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns. That is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns, the ones we don't know we don't know.

You might remember this. It was spoken by one who, up until a few years ago, occupied the elevated position in the United States government which goes by the title 'Secretary of Defense'.

At the time these words of Donald Rumsfeld were dismissed as obfuscation and became the butt of much humour. But they were not in fact stupidities; there was a knowingness here. Rumsfeld actually spoke in a manner which can be heard as honouring the memory of someone even more famous, one by the name of Niccolò Machiavelli.

I say this because, whether or not *we* knew, Rumsfeld *knew*; as secretary he was, after all, a keeper of secrets. If Rumsfeld was a secretary then, he was, like Machiavelli, and in keeping with the etymology of that term, positioned as confidential officer.⁴

With its stress on formality such a position brings us closer to that of secretary in a school of psychoanalysis. If the confidential officer is *confidential*, the stress is on the *official* over the private. This linking of intimacy with the public and the functional has the advantage, for our purpose, of speaking to the link between the erotic and the formal.

But let me now propose to you that the official secretary, that is, the official secretary who truly occupies that position, has a different relation to knowledge than that of Rumsfeld. This is the position which the academic Douglas Biow has articulated in his study of the secretary of the Italian Renaissance.

Biow points out that, as secretaries of this species go, Machiavelli was in fact something of an exception. In his treatise *The Prince* Machiavelli says *too much*, and what he says too much about calls our attention to what Biow calls the secretary's *field of operations*.⁵ This field of operations is essential for the function of the secretary; it is what, at a given moment, makes the very practice of secrecy both possible and necessary.

What Machiavelli *promotes* is however something else: the existence of the unknown domain of the Other's secret knowledge, a domain which is here located in the person of the Prince. Machiavelli's purpose is to disclose that he has knowledge of the existence of that domain of unknown unknowns.

To the extent that Machiavelli displays this knowledge he abandons the practice of secrecy proper to the function of secretary as such; he moves from the position of secretary proper to one who promotes himself as having the ear of the prince.

This is, I suggest, also Rumsfeld's position. In this sense we can say that Rumsfeld is, indeed, Machiavellian.

Biow contrasts Machiavelli's position with that of another secretary from the same period by the name of Torquato Acetto. Acetto wrote a much less well-known treatise to which he gave the wonderful title *On Honest Dissimulation*. It is striking that this treatise is not about the prince but about the *secretary*.

In his treatise Acetto does not display a withholding of the domain of the other's secrets. Rather, he demonstrates an abstention, *an abstention in favour of the order of secrecy itself*. Here we find a deviation, not only from Machiavelli but also from Rumsfeld and other secretaries of his ilk.

If Acetto dissimulates about what he knows it is an *honest* dissimulation; that is, what his text demonstrates is something of the not-known truth of that dissimulation. By this dissimulation of dissimulation Acetto discourses on the position of secretary in a manner which *openly* presents the incompleteness of this very discourse. At the same time he abstains from going further in order to present himself as one who might nevertheless know what is missing.

In doing this what Acetto makes known is the *value* of his position as secretary as such. This value is given not in its deference to the prince, but in respect of what is circumscribed by the secretary's own *function*, that is, in respect of his field of operations. This is not the unknown domain of the Other's unknowns knowingly held back, but the domain of the unknown unknowns *as such*.

Thus, as Biow says, it does not matter so much what Acetto *says* in his treatise as that by the *manner* of his saying he "cancels his own text in order to *publicly* bring himself into existence as an inaccessibly valuable *private* being."⁶ To paraphrase this, we might say that, unlike Machiavelli and Rumsfeld, Acetto makes a *stupidity* of his own text in order to signify the value of what is inaccessible in that discourse which, as secretary, he promotes.

In this way Acetto makes of his profession a practice. It is a practice rather than a profession inasmuch as, first and foremost, it has no utility for any other, not even for the prince. And yet at the same time, and just because of the manner of its open abstention, it is a practice which, by holding to the rigour of its own discourse, is rather disconcerting. What it makes known is something of particular and inestimable value, but only by indicating that that something lies in what is necessarily excluded from the very discourse which purports to speak of it.

Now, it will not have escaped your attention that the logic of Acetto's position is not inconsistent with Lacan's formulae of the half-said and the well-said. It also speaks, I think, of the position of the analyst inasmuch as he holds himself at some remove in order to function for the analysand as semblant of *objet a*. And with this we are returned by Lacan to the difficulty which embodiment poses in the love relation between those two.

It is in the opening lesson of his seminar *Encore* that Lacan talks of the embodied presence of the other as an obstacle to love. What the body of the other stands for in the love relation, just by its very presence, is something more, something which is *necessarily* held back. This Lacan calls enjoyment (*jouissance*) of the Other.

Psychoanalysis demonstrates, says Lacan, that love is caught up in identification: it wants to make One with the other. He uses his now-famous anecdote about Picasso and his parakeet to illustrate how love attempts to do this:

Love. I can all the same tell you through a little example, the example of a parakeet that was in love with Picasso. Well then, that could be seen from the way he nibbled on the collar of his shirt and the flaps of his jacket. This parakeet was in effect in love with what is essential to man, namely, his attire.⁷

What, it seems to me, Lacan is seeking to illustrate here is that the body of the other, and more particularly what it stands for by way of enjoyment, is always and inescapably missed in the love relation. In the One to which identification is directed and which is endemic to love of the human variety it is never the body of the other as such which is arrived to but rather the image of the other. In other words, what is arrived to is the body of the other not as *presence* but as *it is presented*.

In love therefore the body has a function but only inasmuch as, by means of the attributes and emblems with which it is attired, it symbolises that Other to which love looks in order to make One. But in love something more insists. This has to do with how the other, just in being present to the demand for love, functions to exclude from that demand a modicum of enjoyment. As Lacan puts it at another point in the lesson from *Encore*, there is a gap “between this One and something which depends on being, and behind being, on enjoyment”.

Lacan continues in this anecdotal vein but with the *dramatis personae* changed from Picasso and his parakeet to a monk and his habit:

It is the same with everything involved in love. In other words, the habit loves the monk because it is through it that they are all one. In other words, what is under the habit and what we call the body, is perhaps only in the whole affair this remainder that I call the *objet petit a*. What holds the image together is a remainder. And what analysis shows is that love in its essence is narcissistic, that the yarns about the objectal is something whose substance it knows how to expose precisely in what is the remainder in desire, namely its cause, and what sustains it, in its dissatisfaction, indeed its impossibility.⁸

Thus, if by its presence the body of the other has a place in the love relation it is only, in the end, as remainder. It is this remainder which, functioning as *objet a*, object-cause-of-desire, ‘holds together’ the image of the other, that semblance which is taken to be the object of love. In this way the body enables the object of love to be given its essential, but always illusory and narcissistic, substance. At the same time the body beckons to what of substance is left over in this made-up One. Beyond love, the taunt which the Other’s enjoyment poses beckons to the impossibility of desire.

Now I think this account of the impossibility of desire has a particular resonance not only for what is sustaining in a psychoanalysis and for the subject which might sometimes arise in it, but also for what is sustaining for a school of psychoanalysis and for the places within it. And it is perhaps with the secretary that this is most apparent.

If we follow Torquato Acetto, what the secretary promotes is not himself as the individual who has the ear of the Other but rather a *discourse*, one which gives due weight to his field, the domain of the unknown unknowns. This therefore is a practice which holds to the unwelcome and half-unsayable truth which lies behind the dissimulated One. As such it will

not make a fit with the overweening performance of any actual incumbent of that position, including my own.

This is indeed an impossible match, and not least because any incumbent is embodied. But in being embodied the secretary, as such, must lend himself to the *jouissance* of that place. This is not necessarily a very comfortable position. But if he is to be present as secretary he has the responsibility to make a response to what is demanded of him by that impossibility.

By the manner in which he does this, that is, by his practice, the secretary may on occasion be able to make known that, behind the nonsense of his being, in the very discourse of his making known in the school, something of inestimable value insists. What is left to be seen, then, is the work that he loves.

¹ This paper is based on the preamble to the author's first report as Secretary, given at the Annual General Meeting of *The Freudian School of Melbourne* in December 2006.

² Analyst Member, *The Freudian School of Melbourne, School of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*.

³ As Freud said, "[...] you cannot be present as an audience at a psychoanalytic treatment. You can only be told about it; and, in the strictest sense of the word, it is only by hearsay that you will get to know psychoanalysis." (Freud, Sigmund. "Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis". Vol. XV. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*. Tr. James Strachey et al. London: The Hogarth Press, 1961. 18).

⁴ The word secretary comes from the Latin, originally as *secretum*, meaning 'secret', and later as *secretarius*, meaning 'confidential officer'.

⁵ Biow, Douglas. "From Machiavelli to Torquato Acetto: The Secretarial Art of Dissimulation". *Educare il corpo educare la parola nella trattatistica del Rinascimento*. Ed. Giorgio Patrizi. Rome, 1998. 230.

⁶ Biow, "From Machiavelli to Torquato Acetto". 236. My emphases.

⁷ Lacan, Jacques. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XX. Encore 1972-1973*. Tr. Cormac Gallagher. Unpublished, lecture of 21st November 1972.

⁸ Lacan, *Encore*.