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ŽIŽEK

AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES

ON THE EMERGENCE OF THE
SLOVENIAN LACAN

JONES IRWIN | HELENA MOTOH

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Žižek and his Contemporaries

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On the Emergence of the
Slovenian Lacan

**JONES IRWIN AND
HELENA MOTOH**

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For Eloïse

To Staš and Adam

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements ix

Introduction 1

In the beginning 1

Why Lacan? 6

Development of chapters 8

1 What *was* going on in Ljubljana? 13

‘The Unconscious is Structured as Yugoslavia’ 13

Waiting for the match to be cancelled 15

The emergence of nationalism 18

Genealogies of philosophy in the former Yugoslavia 22

‘I Walked our Land and Got an Ulcer’ 26

‘Gentlemen comrades, I don’t believe you’ 29

Conclusion 33

2 The Lacan effect 39

Introduction 39

Interpreting Lacan 41

Psychoanalysis and philosophy 46

Psychoanalysis and surrealism 50

‘Kant with Sade’ 56

Lacan’s *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 64

Conclusion – Lacanianism via Derrida and the

Ljubljana troika 77

- 3 From punk to cogito to voice:
On Mladen Dolar 83
- Introduction – Dolar’s philosophical evolution 83
Reading Lacan-Hegel-Marx in Dolar 86
Socrates and the daemonic voice 90
‘From Structuralism to Lacan’ – Interview with
Mladen Dolar 93
Conclusion – Dolar: Breaking through the impasse 112
- 4 ‘Learn, Learn and Learn’ – On Slavoj Žižek 117
- Introduction 117
The core of the Freudian revolution 120
Lacan, then and now 123
‘From Lacan to Hegel’ – Interview with Slavoj Žižek 125
Conclusion – ‘Moving the Underground’ with the NSK 146
- 5 ‘From Haso to Mujo’: On Alenka Zupančič 151
- Introduction 151
The ethics of the real 153
Sexuality from Plato to psychoanalysis 155
‘Encountering Lacan in the Next Generation’ –
Interview with Alenka Zupančič 158
Conclusion – ‘From Haso to Mujo’ 178
- Epilogue – ‘We Don’t Know What Will Become
of This Psychoanalysis’ 183
- Introduction 183
Lacan ‘On a Warpath from the Beginning’ 185
The deadlocks of Lacanianism 188
‘The New Wounded’ – Žižek for and against Malabou 190
Conclusion – Enjoy your future! 194
- Notes* 197
Bibliography 203
Index 213

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Jones dedicates this book to his eldest child, his beautiful daughter Eloïse, who thinks philosophy may or may not be worth all this effort.

Jones Irwin, Dublin, 15 October 2013

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Helena Motoh, Ljubljana, 15 October 2013

Introduction

*Fucked by the Absolute/ fed up with virgins and other
dying sufferers/ I love you o neighbors, meek fantasies of
God the Father/ I love you o integral characters of sweet
gazing/ In my mind grace yielded// O proud possessors
of anxieties/ O trained intellectuals with sweaty little
hands/. . . . I walked our land and got an ulcer/ Land
of Cimpermans and pimply groupies/ Land of serfs
myths and pedagogy// O flinty Slovenians, object of
history crippled by a cold.*

(ŠALAMUN DUMA [Word])

In the beginning

We [myself and my group] had been ultraorthodox Lacanians from roughly the mid 1970s onwards.

(ŽIŽEK AND DALY 2003: 33)

In recent years, Slovenian intellectuals with a strong (or ‘orthodox’) Lacanian emphasis have had a very significant influence on the international development of philosophical thinking. Led inimitably by Slavoj Žižek, this foregrounding of Slovenian thought has also been influential outside the groves of academe, with Žižek’s distinctive personality in particular generating a movie in his name (Žižek 2007b) and has been the subject of much media attention.¹ However, at times, this popularity of Žižek has overshadowed or marginalized the very serious intellectual and philosophical

significance of this movement or shared sensibility. Although only coming to international notice in the early 1990s, Slovenian neo-Lacanianism needs to be understood as the culmination of a whole series of intellectual and political movements inextricably connected to the quest for Slovenian national independence from Yugoslavia, especially from the late 1970s onwards. In Slovenia, these movements originated in the punk music counter-culture and evolved into a significant avant-garde and alternative movement known as *Neue Slowenische Kunst* (NSK; New Slovene Art), which included the internationally recognized group, Laibach, the visual artists IRWIN and the theatrical group Sestre Scipion Nasice. Monroe (2005) has described the latter as, for example, 'the most important avant-garde of the second half of the twentieth century' and 'the last avant-garde'. The philosophers we will be concerned with were also participants in and influential on the NSK, in various significant ways (most especially as the movement influenced the political process).

This book will attempt to do justice to this complex and fascinating history, with interviews with the leading philosophical figures of the movement (Žižek, Zupančič and Dolar) as well as an analysis of the wider new social movements in Slovenia. One of the authors, Helena Motoh, is herself a Slovenian philosopher of the younger generation and, as such, has a lot of local insight and understanding of both the political and intellectual dynamics of the development of this very specific strand of thinking. The other author, Jones Irwin, is also a younger philosopher with a specific expertise in 1960s' or 1970s' French philosophy, which was to be so influential on later Slovenian thinking. One significant factor here relates to the fact that unlike other Yugoslav republics or indeed the wider Eastern bloc, Slovenian intellectuals were allowed to travel to and study in Paris in the 1970s and 1980s, which created a greater cosmopolitanism in Slovenia than in its neighbouring countries. Additionally, many of the significant Slovenian intellectuals who studied abroad chose to return to Slovenia after their studies rather than go into exile. This latter was obviously a significant factor in the strengthening of Slovenian philosophy at home.

While our book is subtitled 'the emergence of the Slovenian Lacan', the trio or 'troika' of thinkers, who we will be most

concerned with, are more specifically associated with the city of Ljubljana. Thus, their work is often referred to (by themselves also) as part of a Ljubljana School of Psychoanalysis. This is the name we will use consistently throughout the book for the activities of this group of thinkers. Nonetheless, there is also a wider focus to their work. First of all, this focus takes its cue from the national context of Slovenia as well as from the wider relationships in the former Yugoslavia, coming under the self-management socialism of Tito. We will discuss this former Yugoslavian context in most detail in Chapter 1, as it evolves from the 1970s through the controversies and Balkan wars of the 1980s and 1990s, including independence for Slovenia. One of the most curious aspects of this history is the specific orientation towards Lacanianism which we can see emerge in the Slovenian context of theory and politics. Močnik (1993) has given an excellent analysis of this evolution and spoken of it significantly in terms of the 'impasse' associated with other structuralist (and post-structuralist) philosophies, with Lacan's philosophy being designated as a 'breakthrough' moment. Not least of the dilemmas which this book will seek to address is the fact that the most enigmatic of all philosophical and theoretical systems in the twentieth century (that of Jacques Lacan, as friend and foe would agree) has come to have had such a key role in practical, political and sociocultural struggles in recent times. What is it about Lacan's philosophical system (if we can speak in such a way), which allows or enables this kind of political activism, of such a radical sort? Moreover, we will see in the context of the Ljubljana School of Psychoanalysis that they too (Žižek, Dolar and Zupančič) will come to play a crucial role in their own national, political and sociocultural struggles (leading up to independence). Also, recently, their work has taken on paradigmatic significance on a more global level, in terms, for example, of intra-leftist discussions (and diatribes) (Laclau 1989; Žižek et al. 2000) as well as discussion and inspiration around the Arab Spring and the Occupy movement in the last 2 years (Žižek 2012b). This proximity to political events is in stark contrast with many other so-called 'political philosophies' (on the surface, often far more seemingly accessible and relevant) which often inhabit a purely intra-theoretical or more rarefied academic space (having little or no impact on 'Realpolitik') (Močnik 1993; Mastnak 1988).

One of the key tensions in the book will concern the relation between, on the one hand, the very historically and culturally specific set of circumstances from which this troika of thinkers emerges, the spatio-temporal contingency of their philosophical work, and, on the other hand, the universal appeal and/or validity of the Ljubljana School of Psychoanalysis and their theoretical production. In their introduction to a joint-authored work on opera, *Opera's Second Death*, Dolar and Žižek (2002) make precisely the same point in terms of their struggle to come to terms with the meaning of opera. On the one side, opera as the philosophers see it, and here their models are Mozart and Wagner (Dolar and Žižek 2002), emerges from a specific context and set of coordinates. On the other side, the operas discussed seem to completely transcend their time and place and remain ultimately irreducible to these spatio-temporal aspects. But, of course, the demand should never be simply 'either/or' in such a context. As Žižek and Dolar (2002: vii) note here, 'if we reduce a great work of art or science to its historical context, we miss its universal dimension; apropos of Freud, it is also easy to describe his roots in fin-de-siècle Vienna – much more difficult is demonstrating how this very specific situation enabled him to formulate universal theoretical insights'.

How might we apply this logic of what Zupančič terms 'concrete universality' – simultaneously irreducibly particular and universalist (also, tellingly, her description of the movement of comedy; Zupančič 2008a) – to the work of the Ljubljana troika themselves? Žižek is always keen to undermine any univocal understanding and so we see him, for example, satirizing the international perception of the work in Slovenia, as if there was some local private joke going on. When people come to visit Ljubljana, he says, to see and understand the work of the Lacanian troika, it is 'like getting caught with our pants down': 'it is almost as if we are caught with our pants down when someone comes to Ljubljana; and then we just have to tell him nothing is happening here; there are three of us who simply meet as friends; and that's it' (Žižek and Daly 2003: 37). But simultaneously, of course, it is precisely this friendship which we should take, in a philosophical sense, seriously. Even in 2012, with his latest magnum opus *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (Žižek 2012a), the dedication is striking – 'To Alenka and Mladen – because die Partei hat immer Necht', that is 'the Party is

always right'. We could read this dedication in different ways and there is a specific reference back to the whole ideological edifice of 'the Party' under state socialism in former Yugoslavia, a history which plays a central role in the genealogy of the 'Slovenian Lacan'. But, there is also the 'party' of the troika themselves, a partnership which, in the case of Dolar and Žižek, extends all the way back to their shared undergraduate philosophy days in the late 1960s. Zupančič becomes part of this story, as a gifted student of both Dolar and Žižek in the 1980s. Since then, she has become very much part of the group in her own right through the 1990s, already publishing under Žižek as editor in English as early as 1992, for example, in *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock* (Zupančič 1992; Žižek 1992b), a volume to which Dolar also contributed several essays. Through the anthologies in the 1990s and up to the monographs in 2000 and after, mostly under Žižek as series editor (e.g., Zupančič 2000; Dolar 2006), the Ljubljana Lacanian troika has become an internationally established entity. As Žižek has noted regarding this nomenclature, 'Here again you have your KGB Stalinist troika; you know how communists were always organised as troika, as units of three, to liquidate people? It's strictly a troika now; with Alenka Zupančič, Mladen Dolar, and myself' (Žižek and Daly 2003: 37). While Žižek remains undoubtedly the most influential and best known of this trio, at least internationally, we will explore how the narrative of the 'Slovenian Lacan' is one which can only be properly understood on a broader and more complex canvas which takes account not simply of the activities and theories of Zupančič, Dolar and Žižek, but also of the wider artistic and intellectual currents in Slovenia and the former Yugoslavia, which became inextricably connected to the political developments during the 1980s and 1990s most especially.

As with the aforementioned hermeneutic of opera then (Dolar and Žižek 2002), so too with the Ljubljana School of Psychoanalysis. We must simultaneously seek to do justice to the (extraordinary) set of particularist circumstances and events which seem to make sense of the evolution of the group's thinking, while also seeking to articulate the ways in which this thought precisely moves beyond such contingent circumstances to embrace a more wholehearted philosophical vision of the world.

Why Lacan?

One of the most interesting and perplexing questions in relation to this intellectual movement is ‘why Lacan’? Given the exposure of Žižek and Dolar not simply to Lacan, but also to Althusser, Derrida, Foucault, Kristeva and the whole gamut of what they term the original movement of ‘French Structuralism’ (Dolar et al. 2014), why was Lacan to become such a dominant influence, to the extent that Žižek refers to his own work as an ‘orthodox Lacanianism’ (Žižek et al. 2014)? As Dolar has observed to us in an interview, perhaps this was because Lacan ‘took it further than any other like thinker . . . brought philosophy to its ultimate conclusion’ (Dolar et al. 2014). Of course, the paradox here is that such conclusiveness and orthodoxy, far from generating a sterile or closed system, have given rise to such invigorating and original readings not simply of philosophy, but of political and cultural phenomena. As Žižek observes in his short introduction to the text *Lacan’s Silent Partners* (Žižek 2006b), a significant anthology of Lacan’s wider philosophical context of influence which Žižek edits, ‘the ultimate aim of the volume is therefore not as one usually puts it, to enable readers to approach Lacan in a new way, but rather to instigate a new wave of Lacanian paranoia, to push readers to engage in work of their own, and start to discern Lacanian themes everywhere, from politics to trash culture, from obscure ancient philosophers to Franz Kafka’ (Žižek 2006c: 3). This captures the double bind of Lacan’s philosophical assault perfectly. It captures the twin sense of absolute seriousness and rigor on the one hand and, on the other hand, the kind of flippant mischievousness for which Žižek (as a self-proclaimed orthodox Lacanian) has become particularly famous, seemingly more interested in causing problems in the mode of an *enfant terrible* than in any serious truth seeking. This has hugely extended the relevance and interest of Lacanianism, and has made the Slovenian school arguably the most influential and thought-provoking group of thinkers not only across the humanities today but also in political theory, psychoanalysis, theology and increasingly in the social sciences or sociology (Kay 2003).

At the same time, it has led other commentators to question the philosophical worth of the Ljubljana School of Psychoanalysis, as if this was all some kind of rather unfunny joke being played at the expense of the intellectual community.

Joking and the unconscious

Rather than po-facedly reject such an accusation outright, it seems more appropriate in this context to, precisely, tell a joke. Or more strictly, to repeat a joke. There are many to choose from in the corpus of Lacan and the neo-Lacanian and, of course, in this methodology of the satirical and the comic, Lacan is being true to his word of a 'return to Freud'. For Freud, 'the joke, like the dream and, to some degree, the parapraxis, expresses a repressed or unconscious wish' (Wollheim 1971: 97) and the significance of the topic of comedy for Freudian psychoanalysis is clear, among other places, in *Jokes and Their Relations to the Unconscious* (Freud 2002b). The texts of the Ljubljana School of Psychoanalysis are strewn with jokes and comic asides, but as Zupančič is the only one of the trio of thinkers to dedicate a full monograph to the topic (Zupančič 2008a), we will employ one of her specific jokes here to lead into some of the key issues at stake.

A man believes that he is a grain of seed. He is taken to a mental institution where the doctors finally convince him that he is not a grain of seed, but a man. No sooner has he left the hospital but he comes back very scared, claiming that there is a chicken outside the door and that he is afraid that the chicken will eat him. 'Dear fellow', says the doctor, 'you know very well that you are not a grain of seed but a man'. 'Of course I know that', replies the patient, 'but does the chicken?' (Zupančič 2008a: 15).

What is the significance of this joke for our analysis? One might link it back to Lacan's own vehement critique of idealism in Seminar XI on *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (Lacan 1994). This is a key seminar for Lacan in several respects, as we will discuss below, but in the context of Zupančič's joke, we might say that what is especially significant is Lacan's critique of psychoanalysis as an 'idealism' or a science concerned simply with the internal effects of 'narcissism' and rather his passionate avowal of psychoanalysis as contributing to an 'encounter with the Real' (Lacan 1994). For Lacan, psychoanalysis of the most authentic 'return to Freud' is one which can and must intervene not simply in individual lives but also sociopolitically. This is also Zupančič's claim here for psychoanalysis, through the method of comedy. As she notes, 'what is at stake in psychoanalysis is not simply becoming conscious of the unconscious, and all that often

painfully determines [our] actions and experiences. . . . This is insufficient: the main problem is how to shift and change the very symbolic and imaginary structures in which this unconscious is embodied outside [ourselves]' (Zupančič 2008a: 16).

It is this *raison d'être* of psychoanalysis which allows us to see a clear connection between Lacan's texts and the work of the Ljubljana School of Psychoanalysis. There is here, for all three thinkers – Dolar, Žižek and Zupančič – the rationale for a generalized attack on what Plato would have called *doxa*, the supposed unquestionable common sense of everyday society. As Sarah Kay (2003: 1) notes, 'what Žižek infects us with is a fundamental doubt about the very presuppositions of our social reality'.

Development of chapters

Chapter 1, entitled 'What *was* Going On in Ljubljana?' takes its cue from a significant essay by Mladen Dolar in the journal *Mladina* in 1989, a key political moment in Slovenia, where Dolar deftly interweaves psychoanalytical and political understanding in his motif or principle of 'The Unconscious is Structured as Yugoslavia' (Dolar 1989). In this chapter, we explore the complex political prehistory to the eventual break-up of the former Yugoslavia into independent states in the 1990s. We focus on the key political tensions between the state socialism of Tito and the developing opposition not only in Slovenia but also in the other federal republics. We also look at the tensions within this opposition itself, between more nationalist and leftist aspects. From a more philosophical perspective, we explore how what became known as the Ljubljana School of Psychoanalysis emerges from a very complex history of development, in relation both to the evolution of philosophy as a discipline in Slovenia and to the wider Yugoslavia and in relation to the alternative culture movements which became so important in the 1980s in Slovenia. In the first case, we trace the key distinction between 'dogmatic' and 'nondogmatic' forms of Marxism, first employed by the Belgrade and Zagreb-based Praxis school of philosophy (Motoh 2012) to distinguish between more humanist and scientific forms of Marxism but which came to be used by the Lacanian orientation in Slovenia as a distinction between Marxism that could connect to radical psychoanalysis and Marxism which could not. The high water mark

for this conflict was undoubtedly the *Punk Problemi* issues which we discuss here (Dolar 1982; Žižek 1982; Motoh 2012). In the second case of the relation between the young (Lacanian) intellectuals and the emerging alternative cultures in Ljubljana, we develop the problematic as it extends from punk through to FV 112/15 and video art and finally, and more internationally, to the work of Laibach, IRWIN and the NSK (Gantar 1993; Graziano and Bilic 1993; Monroe 2005). Not the least significant of the thematics of the NSK for our purposes is its foregrounding of the specific problematic of 'Eastern Europe', understood as both an aesthetic and/or philosophical construct which has particular significance in its relation to the often diametrically opposed construct of 'Western Europe' (or 'the West') (IRWIN 1993, 2003a; Dolar 1989). We will see how this thematic is a strong link between the NSK and a similar problematic in the work of the Ljubljana School of Psychoanalysis (although the emphases and conceptual approaches often differ significantly) (Žižek 2003b, 2006c; Dolar 2003).

With this rich and broad canvas of the political and philosophical backstory of ex-Yugoslavia in mind, we then go on, in succeeding chapters, to address the specific interventions of each of the key members of the Ljubljana School of Psychoanalysis to this debate, those interventions, respectively, of Dolar, Žižek and Zupančič. But, before these specialized analyses, in Chapter 2 we explore what we refer to as 'the Lacan effect'. The interpretation of Lacan's texts is a significantly contested problematic and this chapter allows us to explore some of the key issues at stake. We address the relation between psychoanalysis and philosophy in his work, the tensions between his employment, for example, of ancient philosophical sources (going back to the Presocratics [Badiou 2006]), while simultaneously casting aspersions on what he refers to as the 'paranoia' of philosophical and speculative 'system building'. With particular reference to David Macey's controversial but brilliant text, *Lacan in Contexts* (Macey 1988), we explore the often occluded intellectual genealogy of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Here, we follow Macey's critique in his strong emphasis on the relation between surrealism and Lacan, in the varying philosophies of such figures as Bataille (2001) and Klossowski (1991), among others. This allows us to make better sense of Lacan's enigmatic text 'Kant with Sade' (Lacan 2002b) and its important relation to perhaps his most influential and paradigmatic seminar, Seminar VII on

The Ethics of Psychoanalysis (Lacan 1992). Klossowski's rereading of the Sadean legacy is crucial to understanding the complicity between Kantian ethics and Sadean anti-moralism elaborated so elegantly by Lacan. In conclusion, we also look to the affinities between Lacan and Derrida on these questions, especially because an 'ethics of psychoanalysis' as such refuses the 'moralisation of politics', while holding out for what Žižek has recently referred to as the 'political suspension of the ethical' (Žižek 2012a).

This 'Lacan in context' having been mapped out, subsequently allows us to go on to explore the developments of this legacy in each of the individual thinkers in our troika of Žižek, Dolar and Zupančič, which we do in Chapters 3, 4 and 5, respectively. In each instance, we begin our analysis with a critical introduction to the specific thinker's work, followed by an in-depth interview with the philosopher, seeking to articulate a more personal articulation of this complex of issues (with particular reference to the evolution of this complex of issues within the context of the politics of former Yugoslavia). We then follow each interview with a brief concluding analysis which, developing some of the themes raised in the interviews, allows us to contextualize these insights in relation to the philosophers' more systematic work. What emerges from these interviews and critical analysis is the sense of the importance of the work that is being done by the Ljubljana School of Psychoanalysis, its distinctiveness and immense creativity. Against accusations of dogmatism or a sterile orthodoxy, we see that while each member of the group holds to a notion of a Lacanian philosophical and/or a psychoanalytical orientation, that is much more linked to a creative understanding of such a 'positioning' in philosophy, that is, an interventionist strategy in the 'encounter with the Real'. There is also a very strong sense of a philosophical friendship between the three figures (this 'Ljubljana troika' as each describes it) which extends with Dolar and Žižek from the late 1960s right up to the present, with Zupančič's role as an initial student being superseded by her role as a 'collaborator' on equal terms since the early 1990s. This connection of friendship and philosophy (after all, going back to Pythagoras, 'philo-sophia' is a friendship) is key to understanding the work of all three thinkers and has perhaps been underplayed in analyses of Žižek as a more specific figure to date (Kay 2003; although Kay's analysis in itself is excellent). We see how strong the connection remains in the dedication on Žižek's most recent text,

Less than Nothing (Žižek 2012a) and each interview concludes with a looking forward to the ‘group work together’ rather than to any more isolated understanding. What is perhaps most striking in each of the thinker’s work is his and her ability to combine a seemingly esoteric analysis of abstruse philosophical and psychoanalytical topics with a great sense of political and contemporary urgency, as each thinker’s work continues to intervene in key (popular) cultural and political debates of great significance (Žižek 2012b), whether we are talking of the Arab Spring or the Occupy Wall Street movement (Žižek 2012b). Here, one is also reminded of the paradigmatic Marxist dimension of the troika (as Dolar notes, ‘we remain and have always been Marxists of a certain kind’ [Dolar et al. 2014]), of a more ‘nondogmatic’ than ‘dogmatic’ mode to reinvolve the distinction made by Dolar and Žižek during the conflicts of the 1980s (Žižek 1981).

In the Epilogue, we return to a key question of Lacan’s, that is, ‘what will become of this psychoanalysis?’ (Lacan 2008), addressing this topic, first, in relation to the affinities between the troika of thinkers and Lacan’s original legacy (in all its ambiguity and enigma). And, second, in relation to challenges to this approach of the troika from key critiques in philosophy, for example, most recently in Catherine Malabou’s *The New Wounded* (Malabou 2012) and also in terms of a neo-Derridean inheritance (Derrida 2000; Irwin 2010), for example, in the work of Nancy (2005) and Butler et al. (2000). Once more, we will see how psychoanalysis, in its Lacanian version at least (which, on Lacan’s terms, constitutes precisely a ‘return to Freud’), remains a very significant philosophical intervention in current debates, whether of specific philosophical provenance (the nature of embodiment, sexuality etc.) or in relation to key questions connecting political crises in the world (East vs. West, liberal vs. multiculturalist, feminism, democracy, the Third World, socialism). In such debates, it is clear that the ‘forces of destruction’ (what psychoanalysis refers to as the ‘death drive’ [Freud 2002a; Lacan 1994]) may have the upper hand. But it is always to be expected, as Freud pointed out in one of his last and supposedly most pessimistic texts, *Civilisation and Its Discontents* (Freud 2002a), that that great ‘adversary’ of these forces of destruction, ‘immortal Eros’, that is Love, should make a final recovery, despite all the appearances of having been defeated: ‘And now it is to be expected that the other of the two

“heavenly powers”, immortal Eros, will try to assert himself in the struggle with his equally immortal adversary’ (Freud 2002a: 81). Freud completed these seemingly concluding words of his infamous text in 1930, but thought it imperative to add one last, haunting question in 1931: ‘And who can foresee the outcome?’ (Freud 2002a: 81).

CHAPTER ONE

What *was* going on in Ljubljana?

‘The Unconscious is Structured as Yugoslavia’

On 29 September 1989, the alternative weekly journal *Mladina* featured a humorous half-page article, entitled ‘The Unconscious is structured as Yugoslavia’ (Dolar 1989). Mladen Dolar, author of the funny metaphor and the article, tried to mockingly show that a contingent selection of Yugoslav places and people contributed to the making of Freud’s psychoanalysis. As Freud recalled at the beginning of *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (Freud 2010), it was during a debate with a fellow passenger on a train trip from Dubrovnik to some station in Herzegovina that he could not remember the name ‘Signorelli’. This incident in analysis provided a key idea for both the *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* and *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud 2009), published only a year earlier. A series of associations that caused the suppression of the Italian painter’s name was linked to the topics of death and sexuality and with the awkward and even deadly obsession that, according to Freud, Turks allegedly had with sexual pleasures. In another case, described in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud 2009), Freud recalled that in Montenegrin Kotor, he missed a wonderful opportunity (he never specified what that opportunity was) and the memory of this led him to recall a thought from his dreams that