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Jacques Lacan

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Preface by Jacques Lacan

A good thirteen years ago, I used to say to two of those people we call nonentities, which for public opinion, or at least for student opinion, simply better entitles them to occupy the professor's place, 'Don't forget that one day you will give what I am now writing as the subject for a thesis.'¹

As though from a wish that they might look into it: where I would check whether the zero really does have any idea of the place that gives it its importance.

It has happened, then. Nothing has happened to them, only to me: thanks to my *Écrits*, I am now the subject of a thesis.

That this should be due to the choice of a young person is nothing new. To my surprise, ten years after its publication my Rome lecture made the adventure of an intellectual emerging into an American university from a trapper's tunnel.

As we know, it needs a second swallow to make a summer. The second is therefore unique in this place, even if there are several of them. A smile multiplies when it is that of a young person.

Anthony, Anika . . . what a sign of a new wind is insisting in these initials?

May she forgive me then, if I take the opportunity to designate what she effaces by showing it.²

My *Écrits* are unsuitable for a thesis, particularly an academic thesis: they are antithetical by nature: one either takes what they formulate or one leaves them.

Each of them is apparently no more than a memorial to the refusal of my discourse by the audience it included: an audience restricted to psychoanalysts.

But, precisely by including them without retaining them, each article shows by a further twist that there is no knowledge without discourse. For what would such knowledge be: the unconscious one imagines is refuted by the unconscious as it is: a knowledge put in the place of truth; this can be conceived only within a structure of discourse.

An unthinkable discourse, because it could only be held if one was ejected from it. Perfectly teachable, however, by a half-speaking: a technique which realizes that truth can only be half-spoken. This presupposes that the psychoanalyst never shows himself except in an asymptomatic discourse, which is, in effect, the least one can expect of him.



Conclusion

discourse which is formed by the rules of society, non-thematic traditions and cultural data, one is led to recognize in it a radically new and astonishingly lucid philosophy of man.

Certainly, the determination of language – spoken or not – on the formation of the subject may seem to exist in Freud. It seems more accurate to say that we can deduce it from texts in which it is quite obvious without necessarily being stated as such.

Understanding consists in reading between the lines, establishing unexpected connexions between different branches of knowledge. This understanding permeates the whole of Lacan's work.

The characteristic genius of Lacan is also responsible for having proposed a remarkable explanation of some of the innermost aspects of the subject's unconscious.

Thanks to the efforts of the Lacanian school of psychoanalysis, we can today understand how the unconscious is formed at the beginning of life, what it is composed of, and what its precise modes of arrangement and functioning are.

Or again, we can cite the Lacanian contribution in the field of psychosis. This field has become much more open to us since Lacan rethought the Freudian notion of *Verwerfung*, once more in the light of the data of linguistics.

Personally, I am convinced that psychoanalysis has taken a great step forward with the thought of Jacques Lacan. Its practice can now be enriched by a greater efficacy.

As far as I am concerned, I make no claims to have mastered all the difficulties to be met with in the study of a Jacques Lacan. I would be happy to be recognized as possessing the simple virtue of having proposed reasonable and clear explanations which will in future allow others to go further.

Appendix: general purport of a conversation with Lacan in December 1969

Solicited by my questions as to the value of the theoretical inferences of Laplanche's 'The unconscious: a psychoanalytic study' (48), Dr Lacan provided me with the basis of his criticisms, and also agreed to say a few words about it in his Preface.

He also gives his explanation of the profound causes of such a divergence of thought in the very heart of his school.

What follows is a synthesis of the essential content of our conversation in December 1969.

With his very first words, Lacan states his trenchant opposition to the fundamental proposition defended by his follower Laplanche. To state, as does Laplanche, that 'the unconscious is the condition of language' is, he says, to go directly against the very point on which his own statements leave absolutely no possible doubt, namely that, on the contrary, language is the condition of the unconscious.

Lacan declares himself to be perfectly aware of the problem which has led his follower to look for a principle limiting the primary process at the level of conscious language. But Lacan does not solve this problem in the same way; he does not solve it by resorting, as does Laplanche, to an interaction between the preconscious-conscious system and the unconscious system, and to a stable fixing of the unconscious signifier to the instinct.

The metaphor of the ballast in the bottom of the hold which stops the boat pitching too much is, he stresses, quite incapable of accounting for the extraordinarily dissociative effects of the return of the repressed; *a fortiori*, it is incapable of ensuring any limitation of the primary process at the level of conscious language.

Lacan places too much emphasis on the principle of the double inscription – the separation between the systems, the geometric and topographical distribution of the systems – to authorize any such conscious-unconscious interaction.

In this connexion, Dr Lacan recalls the import he gave to the notion of the anchoring point as the 'mythical' point at which discourse hooks itself on to signification.

There is no place in Dr Lacan's statements to me about the anchoring point for the interpretation worked up by his follower.

Discourse, remarks Lacan, leads, through stumblings and errors, towards a vain search for truth. It is inscribed in a dialectic in which the mistake, rather than the truth, is the object being run to ground. Through the play of references back from sentence to sentence and from word to word, 'it is possible' to arrive, not at the real, which is excluded from thought, but at a particularly successful signifying montage which is more effective than another and which proves itself in praxis.

There is no return to the elementary fixation of the unconscious in Lacan's views on the limits of the conscious primary process, and no recourse to the 'equivocality' of signifiers in his description of the anchoring point.

The notion of the anchoring point concerns conscious language, and, from the conversation as a whole, it transpires that Laplanche's interpretation of it – a sort of sudden metaphoric skidding towards the unconscious – cannot be reconciled with the importance given to the established principle of the double inscription.

Lacan in fact stresses that it is precisely because the unconscious is another discourse and is situated in another place that confirmation of the double inscription is necessary and cannot be denied, whatever level of analysis is examined.

Here again, the way in which Laplanche sees things does not meet with Lacan's approval. The gestaltist image proposed by Laplanche to explain the phenomenon of the double inscription derives from the overall aim of his text.

Lacan conceives the duality of inscriptions as being a reduplication of the same signifier in completely different – above all, topographically different – batteries. Each of the two inscriptions, supported, then, by the same signifier, has a different import because of the site of its support.

In support of this principal statement, Lacan gives the metaphor of a number of hieroglyphs inscribed simultaneously on both sides of an obelisk, and whose meaning changes completely from one side to the other.

Again, if one accords Lacan's position on the double inscription its full weight, it becomes impossible to follow Laplanche when he suggests the principle of an ordering of the conscious language system by the elementary discourse of the unconscious. The double inscription principle, based upon the topographical and functional separation of the conscious and unconscious systems, remains valid for every level of the fashioning of the unconscious and also for its origins. From the outset, it excludes any possibility of the two systems overlapping.

Lacan considers that the compilation of a minimal signifying battery made in the article (48) fully conforms to his own intuition. He nevertheless objects to the logical process which leads his follower to this fortunate deduction.

The process in question is familiar to us: it is the algebraic transformation of the metaphoric formula for repression given by Lacan in 'On a question preliminary to any possible treatment of psychosis' (23).

Lacan's Preface to the present text adequately denounces the error made by Laplanche, thus allowing us to take a short cut on this point.

The process of algebraic substitutions and simplifications leads to a whole collection of errors, the principal error certainly being the relation of reciprocity established between conscious and unconscious language to the detriment of the separating line, which is intended to split them irreversibly. A further error is that leading to the idea that a signifier can signify itself.

On the other hand, Lacan makes no pronouncements as to the problem of the nature of the signifiers in the unconscious or as to the status they acquire there.

The only precision he makes concerning the Freudian term *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz* is a remark about translation. The translation he proposes (*représentant de la représentation*) is certainly very different from that which prevails elsewhere. His own translation, 'representative of the presentation', includes an idea which is not contained in the alternative translation, 'representative' (*représentant-représentatif*), imposed until now by general usage.

According to Lacan, the use of the genitive – *Vorstellungs* with an *s* – followed by the term 'presentation' (*repräsentanz*) throws light upon Freud's intention. What Freud is indicating is the subject's status as representation, a status already brought out by the second Freudian topography which substitutes the triad id-ego-superego for that of conscious-preconscious-unconscious.

Lacan is also conscious of the fact that the present period is a historical turning point for him.

The incidence amongst the public of an article like that by Laplanche is a tell-tale sign.

For Lacan, the hour has come for 'discourse' to take hold of his work and retransmit it. His thought has become prey to partiality, something to be threshed, to be turned this way and that, to be distilled in the general consciousness; a thought refracted by multi-faceted intelligences motivated by many divergent currents of thought.

Within this classic phenomenon of distortion and dilution, it should be possible to make out the foreseeable lines of force as to the causes of the deformation and as to the forms it takes.

As far as Lacan's work is concerned, the movement of refraction will be marked by the convergence of three factors: the complexity of

the text, the subject dealt with, and, finally, the intuitive, pointillist process of the thought.

His statements, he declares, have nothing in common with a theoretical exposé justified by a closure. To use his own metaphor, his *Écrits* are merely stones scattered along the way, the major part of his teaching having so far remained unpublished. The majority of the articles collected together in the 900 pages of the *Écrits* seek to pin down the essentials of the subject-matter of his seminars. What is more, they introduce this matter in the context of an epistemological critique of the current psychoanalytic view of the domain being studied.

The *Écrits* do not, then, form a didactic summa of his thought, nor the summa of a thought which has arrived at its full maturity.

As such, they leave certain points unsettled and trigger off multiple attempts at prospective exposés or premature explanatory inferences.

Lacan tells us that it is by way of this quest for something finite that error sometimes creeps in. He considers it as infiltrating itself all the more easily in that those who peddle his thought are constrained by their status as teachers to adopt a didactic position.

The academic discourse which conveys knowledge is therefore responsible for its slidings and its modifications in history.

The discourse of the university is closer to *doxa*, to opinion, whereas knowledge is closer to *epistémè*, to science.

This circular relationship in which knowledge and opinion engender one another attests once more to discourse's dominance over what it relates, and, above all, to the devitalizing power of discourse.

As far as the retransmission of psychoanalytic science by way of university teaching is concerned, other factors appear in addition to the simple play of meaning under the influence of language.

No proposition made by teaching psychoanalysts can be devoid of unconscious implications. And the search for social status could, without their being aware of it, provoke that wish to make innovations at all cost which can be seen in some of them.

Lacan's thought is becoming more and more widespread and is already undergoing basic modifications at the hands of this perpetual movement of oral republication. Based upon a de-centring of the statements from their context, these modifications reduce his thought to *doxa* by taking the edge off its authentic character.

In short, what emerge from this conversation are the points of theoretical clarification mentioned and, what is particularly important, the two lines of force in Lacan's mind. Namely, the sub-stratum of a behaviour founded upon a distrust of university teaching, its didactic character and its Cartesian research.

From this, there emerges a belief in the intuitive, 'impressionist' and essentially practical elaboration of scientific theses concerning

psychoanalysis. A belief in this, and a certain pride in being able to discover rather than transmit.

Hence, instinctively and *a priori*, a distrust – once again – of any attempt on the part of his followers or pupils to prolong the roads he himself has left incomplete by throwing bridges over the unknown. A distrust which turns to open hostility when the bridges turn out to have been badly built.

Hence the Preface, which shows how little Lacan tolerates the denaturing of his thought.