

Psychoanalysis as a Hermeneutics of the Subject: Freud, Ricoeur, Lacan

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RÉSUMÉ : La connaissance herméneutique est généralement définie comme un savoir engagé, par opposition au savoir détaché que produit la méthode scientifique. La tension entre ces deux modèles dans la théorie psychanalytique de Freud est ici mise en évidence avec l'aide de Ricœur : cette théorie interprète des intentions conscientes, mais explique en même temps la vie psychique d'une façon mécaniste en termes de pulsions somatiques. On montre ensuite comment le développement lacanien de la psychanalyse rend l'être habituellement caché de la subjectivité — l'inconscient — accessible comme langage. Structuré comme un langage, l'inconscient est articulé et interprétable; et son interprétation est accès au langage du «réel», par-delà les limites de l'objectivité scientifique.

“Hermeneutics” has become a cross-disciplinary buzzword used in a confusing medley of contexts. Independently of the vicissitudes of specific hermeneutic theories and contemporary attempts at their philosophical defense, some vague sense of hermeneutics as a necessary and crucial activity has insinuated itself capillary-wise into the very grammar and ground rules of current discussions of literature and of the humanities in general. Naturally, there are numerous efforts to sharpen and restrict the concept in terms of particular, preferred theoretical models. This is useful and necessary; but it is also important, apart from investments in the technicalities of one or another hermeneutic theory or practice, to ask what the general purport of the hermeneutic approach is.

The hermeneutic point of view can perhaps be most readily grasped as to its basic import by means of an opposition to scientific method.

Dialogue XXXVII (1998), 65-81

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Whereas science endeavours to neutralize or eliminate the activity of the knower in order that the object may be known "objectively," hermeneutic understanding or insight knows and acknowledges itself to be the result of a mutually transforming involvement of the knower with the object known. The scientist strives to know the object as it is in itself (though this may, admittedly, be only phenomenal, that is, appearance to the senses), free from perspectival or personal bias. The hermeneut, by contrast, is interested above all in knowing the meaning the object takes on for someone within a particular context of experience. Moreover, the categories of hermeneutic understanding, rather than being imposed by the subject on the object, emerge from the encounter with the object, or better, the "other," as it gives itself in relation to the knower. Thus, the knower's experience and even self-knowledge within the experience of the other are constitutive of the known rather than being supposedly transparent media through and in which the object becomes present to the knower.

So, the one approach to knowledge demands detachment, the other involvement, of the knower with respect to the known. There may be a scientific side to prescribing the nature and conditions of involvement for proper knowing, but the core of any hermeneutic form of knowing will exceed all that is objectively specifiable in the direction of some irreducibly unique participatory experience. This remains true even of conservative, instrumental hermeneutics prescribing rules for valid textual interpretation. The cause of a call for restrictions is some sort of ineradicably personal interaction between reader and text that needs to be brought under control by defining, for example, the three legitimate "spiritual senses" of Scripture that may be built on the literal one.

These two ways of knowing are perhaps both operative in every act of knowing, since the scientist must at least get close and involved enough with his object to be able to observe it (indeed, scientific discoveries such as the Heisenberg uncertainty principle have underscored how infeasible the involvement of the observer is even in science), and the hermeneut, if he is to interpret anything besides his own solipsism, must have a capacity for distinguishing between self and other and maintain at least provisional, partial detachment from the something (or ultimately someone) else that he would know. Nonetheless, the two approaches tend to be posed as antithetical in most methodologies of knowing, since truth seems to be attainable by the perfection of the one and the refining away of the other, the choice depending on whether truth is defined as conformity to the object or as authenticity of the subject's experience. (Both are, of course, problematic criteria, and the problems raised need to be negotiated by each specific epistemology or hermeneutic).

Psychoanalysis, as a method of treating persons through direct, transforming (supposedly curative) relations, has deep-seated affinities with

the hermeneutic way of knowing. Also, as a discipline founded on the interpretation of texts—a text being not a natural object but, at least *prima facie*, some form of communication from an other—psychoanalysis epitomizes a hermeneutic type of inquiring. However, the practice of psychoanalysis grew up in a cultural milieu where science enjoyed unrivalled prestige and was the virtually unchallenged paradigm of all true knowledge. Understandably, then, the two methods are tangled together inextricably in the works of Freud, and this original ambivalence continues throughout the further development of psychoanalytic theory in Freud's wake.

I would like to show the extent to which psychoanalysis, especially in its Lacanian version, is governed or guided by a hermeneutic approach and ethos, whose logic, to us in our scientifically-minded culture, is much less immediately evident than would be its scientific counterpart. I also wish to use psychoanalysis in order to understand better an obscure region of hermeneutic theory, namely, all that is implied in the word "subjectivity." The subjective element is at the very core of all hermeneutic knowledge, but has remained largely mysterious, a sort of inner limit of opacity for hermeneutic research. If hermeneutics wishes to illuminate such areas of experience as religious or poetic experience, the latter particularly in its lyric form, a hermeneutics of subjectivity is indispensable. Psychoanalysis, more than any other hermeneutic theory, has rigorously examined the subject who knows (and desires), prying into its conditions of production and hidden, repressed identity. Its pragmatically acquired knowledge can be invaluable in shaping any comprehensive theory of hermeneutics.

Freud clearly announces a hermeneutic project in the opening sentence of the *The Interpretation of Dreams*:

In the pages that follow I shall bring forward proof that there is a psychological technique which makes it possible to interpret dreams and that, if that procedure is employed, every dream reveals itself as a psychical structure which has a meaning and which can be asserted at an assignable point in the mental activities of waking life.¹

Freud's insistence on the meaningfulness of dreams contains a recognition of their intentional character—not in the phenomenological sense of positing an intentional object but simply the sense of expressing conscious or unconscious wishes and desires. A dream is not just a phenomenon of the order of things that can be explained by analysis into atomic units or through causal relations to other things. Understanding a dream requires grasping its intention. (Of course, it is the nature of dreams to disguise intentions, but then, nevertheless, understanding dreams entails understanding precisely their intentions to disguise.) One cannot understand the meaning of a dream only by considering it as the sign of some-

thing extrinsic, like indigestion, as Macrobius suggested in his *Dream of Scipio*, with which it is connected by an outside observer. To say the dream is intrinsically meaningful implies that relations between signifiers and signifieds are established *within* the dream itself, and understanding the dream-thought involves thinking these (its) signifying relations. Thus, there is actually a thought within the dream, and, in this sense, it is intentional. Genuine understanding of the dream's meaning demands a participation in thinking the dream-thought rather than an explanation of it in terms of something else.

Freud presents his method of interpretation as being radically opposed to virtually all preceding scientific theories about dreams precisely in its interpreting them as meaningful phenomena:

My presumption that dreams can be interpreted at once puts me in opposition to the ruling theory of dreams and in fact to every theory of dreams with the single exception of Scherner's; for interpreting a dream implies assigning a "meaning" to it—that is, replacing it by something which fits into the chain of our mental acts as a link having a validity and importance equal to the rest. As we have seen, the scientific theories of dreams leave no room for any problem of interpreting them, since in their view a dream is not a mental act at all, but a somatic process signaling its occurrence by indications registered in the mental apparatus. (*Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 128)

For science, then, up to Freud, dreams were epiphenomena to be explained in terms of physiological processes and were not taken as intrinsically meaningful on the basis of their own intentional contents. In rejecting such a reductive, physicalist approach, Freud makes a move characteristic of the phenomenological movement, from which, of course, Heideggerian hermeneutics would eventually stem. It is especially crucial that the criterion of the meaningfulness of dreams is their insertability into the stream of waking consciousness, that is, their having meanings homogeneous and coherent with the meanings that are open to conscious awareness. By this criterion, meaningfulness becomes a matter of being meaningful for a subject consciousness. Subjectivity is built into the concept of meaning. Nothing is meaningful except by being meaningful to *someone*, that is, having a sense of some kind that makes sense to the ordinary waking subject's consciousness.

Freud's discovery of the unconscious meaning of dreams is, somewhat paradoxically, a discovery that dreams are meaningful and that, therefore, their "essential nature" (p. 36), rather than being a physiological disturbance like indigestion, is some sort of intention which can only be conceived of as potentially for consciousness, as the mental act of a subject. This becomes even more apparent when we consider that, on Freud's interpretation, all dreams express the fulfillment of a wish. Now, is a wish even conceivable in abstraction from a subject who wishes it? A pulsion

can be construed as an impersonal non-subjective force; a drive may be somatic; but it makes no sense to speak of a wish as being in the body, unless we psychologize and subjectivize the body. Wishing and intending can only be conceived as mental acts belonging to the consciousness of a subject.

So, clearly, Freud's method of interpreting dreams is a type of hermeneutics, inasmuch as it aims at understanding the intentions of an other, which requires putting oneself in the place of the other, and hence participatory understanding on the part of the interpreter. Yet Freud is satisfied with his method precisely because he deems it to be scientific: "I must affirm that dreams really have a meaning and that a scientific procedure for interpreting them is possible" (p. 132). Evidently, Freud assumes that a scientific and an interpretive approach to dreams are not incompatible; indeed, his purpose in the *Traumdeutung* is precisely to make dream interpretation a scientific procedure. And yet, the sort of mechanistic science Freud draws on—hydraulics, for example—in his conceptions of the human psyche, often threatens to interfere with treating psychological phenomena as intentional and as needing to be interpreted hermeneutically. Indeed, just as important as the hermeneutic features of Freud's interpretation of dreams, as well as of "symptoms" in general, is his discovery of instinctual motivations disguised behind conscious meanings in such a way as to make these meanings mere epiphenomena of biological drives. To this extent, objects of detached, scientific observation—pulsions and drives—are the true and fundamental explanations of the meanings which Freud scrutinizes. The whole thrust of Freudianism, at least in one of its directions, is to dismantle conscious meanings as cover-ups and substitutions for the workings of unconscious, irrational mechanisms. It is just that Freud then turns around and gives an account of these biological mechanisms in terms that make them subjects possessed of meaningful intentions, wishes, and desires. Drives are only knowable at all as representations endowed with intentional qualities. It is precisely this type of equivocation in Freud that Paul Ricoeur has studied in detail.

In *De l'interprétation: essai sur Freud*, Ricoeur traces the development of scientific procedure or discourse side by side with hermeneutic method throughout Freud's *oeuvre*. Although the early emphasis, as in the "Project for a Scientific Psychology" (1885), is decidedly scientific, while the later mythologizing works (featuring Eros, Thanatos, and Ananké) are much more evidently hermeneutic, Ricoeur nevertheless finds the two discourses interlocked in Freud's writing from beginning to end:

Les écrits de Freud se présentent d'emblée comme un discours mixte, voire ambigu, qui tantôt énonce des conflits de force justiciables d'une énergétique, tantôt des relations de sens justiciables d'une herméneutique . . . ce discours mixte, est la raison d'être de la psychanalyse.²

Thus, according to Ricoeur, there is an unceasing shifting back and forth between economic or energetic explanations of psychic phenomena on the one hand and hermeneutic interpretations on the other. What concerns Ricoeur most is not to determine which method is privileged at what stage, but to show the mutual implication of the two throughout Freud's thinking.

Of course, this sort of mutuality in effect constitutes a triumph for hermeneutics, whose natural element is mutuality, by contrast with the definitive and pure knowledge sought by science. The dialogue between science and hermeneutics is eminently comprehensible hermeneutically, but not *vice versa*. This is confirmed, furthermore, in that Ricoeur endeavours to show that the fusion of the two methods in psychoanalysis corresponds to the duplicity of the symbol, since such a synthesis enables him to subsume psychoanalysis under his general theory of the various hermeneutics as methods of interpretation for specific symbolic fields: "le lieu de la psychanalyse se précise: c'est à la fois le lieu des symboles ou du double sens et celui où s'affrontent les diverses manières d'interpréter" (*De l'interprétation*, p. 18). Ricoeur defines symbols as double-meaning expressions, or, in other words, signs that say one thing in order to mean another:

un groupe d'expressions qui ont en commun de désigner un sens indirect dans et par un sens direct et qui appellent de cette façon quelque chose comme un déchiffrage, bref, au sens précis du mot, une interprétation. Vouloir dire autre chose que ce que l'on dit, voilà la fonction symbolique. (*De l'Interprétation*, p. 21)

Ricoeur carefully distinguishes between this type of double-meaning and the duplicity of signifier and signified in the sign. The full structure of the sign, including the referent, belongs to the first meaning of the symbol, but by means of this already completed circuit of meaning the symbol intends to mean something else, and "interpretation"—the word is thus defined for Ricoeur—not just semiotics, is called for to elucidate this further meaning.

The "diverse manners of interpreting" above refers to a subdivision of the hermeneutics of symbols into hermeneutics of faith and hermeneutics of suspicion, depending on whether what the hermeneutic method discovers/uncovers in the symbolic field it examines is considered to be of the order of revelation or of dissimulation. Hermeneutics can be conceived either as an unmasking and discarding of the apparent sense by bringing out the hidden sense as the true one, or as a revealing of a deeper sense beyond the immediate one, which, however, remains nevertheless still true symbolically. Ricoeur, in wishing to valorize Freudian hermeneutics while accepting neither its conclusions nor its overall attitude of suspicion, tries to show that the two sorts of interpretation actually work together as the successive moments of a dialectic. He coordinates an "archæology of the subject" together with a "teleology of consciousness" in a close alliance

(“l’étroite alliance de l’archaïsme et de la prophétie”) in which the two are constitutive of the ambiguity of religious symbols: “les deux valences du symbole restent inséparables; c’est toujours sur quelque trace du mythe archaïque que sont greffées les significations symboliques les plus proches de la spéculation théologique et philosophique” (p. 522). Thus, for him, the “question-clé” is: “le montrer-cacher du double sens est-il toujours dissimulation de ce que veut dire le désir, *ou bien* peut-il être quelquefois manifestation, révélation du sacré? *Et cette alternative elle-même est-elle réelle ou illusoire, provisoire ou définitive*” (17). The emphasis on this collapsing of the alternatives indicates the direction of Ricoeur’s own thinking—as, indeed, it seems to be the vocation of hermeneutic thought in general to mediate and resolve conflict through an unlimited broadening of understanding in order to meet and always accept the other.

What is most useful in Ricoeur’s analysis for determining how far psychoanalysis is a hermeneutic in the sense we have defined is his focus on the juncture between the natural and the intentional, between instinct and its representation, in the Freudian unconscious. Freud’s treatment of instincts tends to make them not merely quantities of blind force but, at the same time, intrinsically intentional phenomena that are understandable only as existing for consciousness, not as objects detached from a meaning/intending subject. In describing pulsions or instincts, Freud states explicitly that “all the categories which we employ to describe conscious mental acts, such as ideas, purposes, resolutions and so on, can be applied to them.”³ Indeed, the instincts are construed by Freud not just as energy but as something psychical, even representational. He defines repression as a preventing of the idea that represents an instinct (or of the ideational presentation of an instinct—“den Trieb rapräsentierende Vorstellung”) from becoming conscious. This is not an idea *of* the instinct, Ricoeur points out, but its presentation or presence, pure and simple, to the unconscious mind. Far from being just force without meaning, the instincts themselves are in this way given a representational and intentional structure.

The same result is reached when Ricoeur attempts to isolate the symbol in its emergence from desire, and, in doing so, finds drive/desire to be united with meaning/intention all along and all the way back. In Freud, according to Ricoeur, desire emerges (or is “posited”) in and with the process of symbolization: “La position du désir s’annonce dans et par un procès de symbolisation” (Ricoeur, *De l’interprétation*, p. 475). Of course, the word “s’annonce,” used to link desire and its symbolization, begs the question of whether and what existence desire might have before coming to articulation, but this is exactly the question Freud himself makes unanswerable in saying of the unconscious, “It is of course only as something conscious that we know it, after it has undergone transformation [*Umsetzung*] or translation [*Übersetzung*] into something con-

scious.”⁴ What is achieved by speaking of desire as coming to consciousness only as an ideational representative or as posited by symbolization is the defining of desire in the form of something that can be interpreted, that can be dealt with by hermeneutic instruments because it is intentional in character.

This is confirmed by a reading of Freud with objectives totally different from Ricoeur’s. Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen’s deconstructive reading of Freud recognizes that, already in their relation to the unconscious, the natural instincts are inscribed within a structure of intentional consciousness and subjectivity by being made homologous to consciousness and its representations: “It is clear then that the unconscious psyche maintains the same relation to the instincts that the conscious psyche does, namely, that of a subject to *its* representations.”⁵

This discovery of subjectivity/intentionality inherent in even the most remote regions of the psyche to which psychoanalysis can reach, such that force and meaning coincide in the unconscious, precisely in the function of *Repräsentanz*, is what Ricoeur calls “l’originalité de Freud.” And this is what permits the interpolation of the acts of the unconscious within the text of consciousness. Here Ricoeur is in perfect agreement with Lacan, who obsessively reiterates that what Freud opposes to all the views of the unconscious as something primordial and pre-conscious is

the revelation that at the level of the unconscious there is something at all points homologous with what occurs at the level of the subject—this thing speaks and functions in a way quite as elaborate as at the level of the conscious, which thus loses what seemed to be its privilege.⁶

In this way, Freud hermeneutizes the unconscious, giving it an intentional structure susceptible to hermeneutic treatment. Nonetheless, Freud was clear in his own mind that his concepts, however well they functioned, could not pretend to grasp the real nature of the instincts or of whatever nature really is: “reality [*das Reale*] will always remain “unknowable.”⁷ But this is a limitation he considered applicable to all sciences, a limitation we might reformulate by saying that all sciences are ultimately hermeneutic in the sense that they afford an understanding of reality only in relation to human beings and their modes of understanding:

The processes with which it [psychoanalysis] is concerned are in themselves just as unknowable as those dealt with by other sciences, by chemistry or physics, for example; but it is possible to establish the laws which they obey and to follow their mutual relations and interdependences unbroken over long stretches—in short, to arrive at what is described as an “understanding” of the field of the natural phenomena in question.⁸

It is striking that this hermeneutic-sounding “understanding” should be an understanding of *inter-relations* of phenomena rather than of phenom-

ena as such, since that is exactly what Structuralism will claim is knowable. In this text, Freud anticipates and in a sense authorizes the development of psychoanalysis along Structuralist lines such as has been pursued with particular creativity by Lacan.

The duplicity of psychoanalytic interpretation as we have, with Ricoeur's help, discovered it in Freud can be expressed in the form of a paradox: Psychoanalysis as a phenomenological hermeneutics seeking to know intention and meaning-for-subject goes right past these and finds true meanings that were never consciously intended. But is not meaning just what it is for consciousness? Cannot Descartes be sure about what he is thinking at least, however dubitable all else beyond his present intention and meaning may be? Or must we see that meaning is disguised in consciousness? Freud's revolution was just his discovery that conscious intentions and meaning were false with respect to the real motivation of thought and behaviour. True knowledge even of itself is not given to consciousness in the immediacy of its self-awareness, but must be acquired through interpretation of the acts which mediate conscious intentions to the world and in the psychic life of the subject. Yet must not these motivations be unpacked at one stage further back as intentions and meanings? Sometimes Freud treats them as merely pulsions, but he does not want to reduce psychic life to that level. The underlying motivations that give the lie to consciously intended meanings are themselves irreducibly meanings and intentions which somebody—somebody who cannot but be conceived as a potentially conscious subjectivity—intends.

In this way, however, consciousness is obliged to gather up its knowledge of itself from outside itself by the interpretation of signs, which designate absences, rather than being allowed to enjoy the certainty and plenitude of its own self-presence. This decentring of consciousness in Freud constitutes his crucial discovery and the starting-point for Lacan: "l'excentricité radicale de soi à lui-même à quoi l'homme est affronté, autrement dit la vérité découverte par Freud."⁹ What basically remained to Lacan (among others) was to bring to bear on Freud's hermeneutic problem the more refined instruments furnished by structural linguistics and so fine-tune the capacity for interpreting the unconscious. Freud himself had underlined the paramount importance of language in the unconscious's operations, as in his uncovering of rebuses beneath seemingly absurd dream-images. By Lacan's account, Freud revealed that the unconscious is structured like a language, and Lacan simply erases crude topography and mechanical metaphors in order to rephrase the unconscious as the discourse of the other.

In its linguistic accent, Lacanian psychoanalysis is right in key with the general hermeneutic principle articulated by Gadamer in the slogan, "Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache" ("Being that can be understood is language"). In fact, ultimately, the aim of hermeneutic phi-

losophy must be to dissolve the distinction between the natural/instinctual and the linguistic/intentional—which dichotomy, we have so far assumed, marks the outer limit of hermeneutics over against the field of inquiry proper to science. In Heidegger's hermeneutic theory, comprehension begins at a pre-articulate stage, as pre-comprehension. Comprehension emerges from an original unity of being and discourse. The priority given to language, in Structuralism as in Heidegger, opens up access to subjectivity in ways Freud could only have dreamed about. Inspired, furthermore, by the Hegelian thesis that all that is real is rational, Lacan endeavours to hermeneutize subjectivity to its (empty) core.

Thus, the aim of Lacanian as well as of other post-structuralist projects (such as Kristeva's analysis of "*le sémiotique*"¹⁰) coincides with the aim of Freudianism as well as of general philosophical hermeneutics in its raid upon the supposedly inarticulate. What all these interpretations claim is that nature, or being, is indeed already articulate and can be understood if approached with adequate hermeneutic wherewithal. We can retrace each of Freud's steps toward the discovery of the meaningfulness of what had previously been regarded as merely irrational activity in the thought of Lacan, simply with the addition of a linguistically more sophisticated formulation of this meaning.

In carrying forward the work of hermeneutization, Lacan sometimes claims to be disabusing psychoanalysis of a certain illusory ideal of scientificity, as reflected, for example, in his rhetoric about psychoanalysis's "*récréation du sens humain aux temps arides du scientisme*."¹¹ And, hence, Michel de Certeau's thesis that "Lacan is first of all an exercise of literature (a literature which would know what it is)," a thesis that emphasizes the way Lacan follows Freud in the discovery of "the necessity of betraying scientific discourse and of moving into the camp of the 'novelists' and 'poets.'"¹² And yet, again just like Freud, Lacan still cherishes the prospect of psychoanalysis's establishing itself as a science: "*Si la psychanalyse peut devenir une science, —car elle ne l'est pas encore—, et si elle ne doit pas dégénérer dans sa technique,—et peut-être est-ce déjà fait—, nous devons trouver le sens de son expérience*" (*Écrits I*, p. 145). In his "Discours de Rome," Lacan spurns vague intuition (at least when trained on the non-verbal) in psychoanalysis as unscientific, and would call analysis back to a standard of scientific rigour. Nevertheless, the "conjectural science" that he proposes can hardly have anything to do with a detached observation of facts; it is expressly not an experimental science. Lacan's entire theoretical discourse situates itself inalienably within the pragmatics of the analytic situation as an intersubjective, transindividual, transformative encounter. It is striking in the last citation how Lacan's wish for psychoanalysis to achieve a scientific status is followed in the very same sentence by an exhortation to it to seek out "the meaning of its experience." This rhetoric—which is what counts or *com-*

municates, as Lacan insists, precisely because it is redundant and does not give information—could not be more quintessentially hermeneutic.

The basic outlines of Lacan's system are conceived entirely within the parameters of a hermeneutic approach to knowledge. The vehemence of his attack against the Imaginary can be readily accounted for by the recalcitrance of Imaginary cognition to hermeneutic treatment. Hermeneutics essentially requires verbal messages, for the image is always perceived in the external dimension of space through the distancing modality of sight, while the word works within the ear, engaging the hearer in a process of mutual modification over the time span of the word's utterance and comprehension. Thus, for Lacan, only in the Symbolic order constituted by language can Truth be attained, which truth must be understood in a hermeneutic, perhaps specifically Heideggerian, sense as disclosure.

The hermeneutic nature of Lacanian-style psychoanalysis is sometimes strongly insinuated by his language itself: symptoms for Lacan are "les hermétismes que notre exégèse résout" (*Écrits I*, p. 161). Moreover, we cannot help noticing the extent to which Lacan's discourse takes on the tone and trappings of a specifically religious hermeneutic enterprise. The insistently evangelical metaphors used to describe Freud and his disciples are not merely metaphors, as metaphors never are in post-structuralist discourse, but something more like symptoms, or even a condensation of the question of being (p. 289). How privileged were Freud's patients "d'en recevoir la bonne parole de la bouche même de celui qui en était l'annonciateur" (p. 172)! The good news of which Freud is the annunciator is the revelation of the unconscious which, prophet-like, he receives: "cette révélation, c'est à Freud qu'elle s'est faite, et sa découverte, il l'a appelée l'inconscient" (p. 267). Lacan even takes it upon himself to determine which books of Freud can be said to be "canoniques en matière d'inconscient" (p. 281).

But even beyond this type of rhetoric, all Lacan's thinking turns on the idea of involved, interactive knowledge that we began by designating as the hallmark of the hermeneutic as opposed to the scientific approach to knowledge. Far from imposing an epistemological framework, the subject only constitutes itself in the linguistic interaction with the other. In Lacan, subjectivity *is* this interpellative structure of speech by which it is calling for an other. The subject is constituted in and not before this call: "La forme sous laquelle le langage s'exprime, définit par elle-même la subjectivité" (*Écrits I*, p. 179). Language, or at least speech (the form in which language expresses itself), is inherently interpellative and addresses itself to the discourse of the other: "ce que je cherche dans la parole, c'est la réponse de l'autre. Ce qui me constitue comme sujet, c'est ma question" (p. 181). Subjectivity is thus constituted as a relation to an other in language, and hence "la parole inclut toujours subjectivement sa réponse" (p. 180).

Because the other is in this way built into it, because as used by a subject it is always looking for a response, language symbolizes communication,

as Lacan explains. The bee language only conveys information which means that “il reste fixé à sa fonction de relais de l’action, dont aucun sujet ne la détache en tant que symbole de la communication elle-même” (*Écrits I*, p.179). By detaching language from this referential function and using it in speech in order to communicate with someone, the subject realizes its own subjectivity. And this desire of communication realized linguistically constitutes itself in language, as metonymy, or as the metonymic structure of all language in speech desiring to communicate. Thus, the identity found (“Je m’identifie dans le langage”) is rather an identity sought in the future anterior: “le future antérieur de ce que j’aurai été pour ce que je suis en train de devenir” (p. 181). And, in this way, the identity of the subject emerges from desire.

Now, this is perhaps just what Freud discovered—so Lacan would have it—only articulated in more overtly linguistic and dialectical terms. It is also the very pattern of the hermeneutic process, yielding self-knowledge through interaction with an other, interaction consisting in an act of communication, open-ended, potentially infinite, and mediated linguistically. Fundamentally, Lacanian psychoanalysis is hermeneutic in its emphasis on the analytic discourse itself as constituting the subject and the subject’s knowledge of itself, which discourse is therefore not a medium through which some transcendent object of knowledge can be discerned beyond language. A hermeneutic approach, as we stated, relinquishes all claims to know either object or subject as they are in themselves, and focuses rather on the interactive phenomena from which structures of objectivity and subjectivity alike are distilled. Hermeneutics thus avoids reifying the knowable into an object prior to engaging in the relation of knowing. The knowledge sought in Lacanian psychoanalysis is emphatically a self-knowledge, not of oneself as a scientifically observable object, but rather as subjectivity in action, that is, in the action of speech.

The adherence to what is present in the analytic discourse, bracketing all else, constitutes a kind of phenomenological reduction, and Lacan’s hermeneutics are in this respect phenomenological, while the accent on knowledge as action and on subjectivity as act (the “double mouvement” of the symbolic function embracing action and knowledge together—*Écrits I*, p. 166), indicates an existentialist element in Lacan’s hermeneutics. There is nothing detached and objective about the Lacanian procedure; it is a totally involved sort of knowing, privileging subjective meaning over objective fact, as a brief selection of quotations will suffice to call to mind.

In the first section of “La fonction et champ de la parole et du langage,” Lacan discusses the roles of the empty word and the full word in the “réalisation psychanalytique du sujet.” Analysis is presented as a “restructuration” and “resubjectivation” of the subject, the constructing of a secondary history in which, nevertheless, the primary historization of the

subject's experience alone comes to take on actual meaning. In "la parole présente" and "la réalité actuelle" of the subject's speech in analysis it is possible to "réordonner les contingences passées en leur donnant le sens des nécessités à venir" (*Écrits I*, p. 132). This process of meaning-giving is the very foundation of psychoanalysis as Freud created it: "C'est bien cette assomption par le sujet de son histoire, en tant qu'elle est constituée par la parole adressée à l'autre, qui fait le fond de la nouvelle méthode à quoi Freud donne le nom de psychanalyse . . ." (p. 134). Consequently, Lacan dismisses any sort of theory of the instincts as fundamentally determinative of the individual's history, asserting (in consonance with our earlier conclusion) that Freud accorded them only "un rang secondaire et hypothétique" (p. 142).

Yet with all this hearkening to the interactive, intersubjective, meaning-determining features of Lacanian psychoanalysis, which coincide with hermeneutic principles, we have so far turned a blind eye to Lacan's formalist side, which is likewise paramount in his thinking. The problem that Lacan addresses particularly in Part 2 of "Fonction et champ de la parole et du langage" is that of the relation between subjectivity and the objective linguistic order—"langue," which exists "antérieurement à sa liaison possible à toute expérience particulière du sujet" (p. 153). Lacan rehearses, in his own original style, the familiar fears about the sheer objective weight of the symbolic order in mass culture ("il mare dell'oggettività" in Italo Calvino's phrase) crushing the particular subject—which, however, is no longer a Romantic individual nor even an Enlightenment ego. At one point he facetiously suggests adding up all the tons of printed paper, record grooves, etc. as an exemplary social research project.

Even in his insistence on formalization via a general theory of the symbol, however, Lacan recognizes that the symbolic function has "subjective sources." He reads the Freudian "fort-da" touchstone text as an account of the creation of symbols, and thus language, by the subject: "la dernière doctrine de Freud désigne, dans une connotation vocalique de la présence et de l'absence, *les sources subjectives* de la fonction symbolique" (*Écrits I*, p. 165; emphasis added). In this way, Lacan's "epistemology of the signifier" is inscribed within a science, and ultimately a hermeneutics, of subjectivity, which is thereby liberated rather than encroached on. For previously, subjectivity had been constrained to theorize itself within the old phenomenological categories of a subjectivity whose meaning derived from the subject's experience of introspection. Language, however, enables Lacan to formalize subjectivity for a more symbolically exact, albeit "conjectural," treatment as an effect of the signifier ("un effet du signifiant"—p. 178). Subjectivity is precisely the formal "I" of discourse, and its contents are anyone's guess—literally: the anyone that conjectures a meaning discovers itself as someone through this adventure of the signifier. Thus, subjectivity can be unburdened of the ponderous connota-

tions of an infinite inward abyss and be given a precise, paradoxically objective formulation (since the “I” inhabits the whole discourse) as the infinity of a chain of signifiers symbolizing desire. In such a metonymic series, composed of infinite substitutions, subjectivity is made accessible and interpretable.

But once the subject has been shown to be an effect of the signifier, in what sense does it make sense to speak of a “science of subjectivity”? Has not subjectivity been dissolved into the objective structures of language? Or would it be more appropriate to say instead that language has been subjectivized? Language can be treated with the utmost formal precision, but it remains at the level of a conjectural science (like mathematics, for that matter, which remains always infinitely interpretable as to the truth value of its purely formal relations), since the meanings it projects can only be conjectured and traced infinitely in the metonymies of desire and the condensations of intention. Meaning and intention are no longer things having some sort of subjected or covert existence. They realize themselves materially in discourse, the discourse of the subject which is interpreted by the signifier that takes on meaning—a conjectural sense, of course, but for that very reason a meaning *for the subject* who is thereby constituted.

Lacan’s formalist move consists essentially in a transfer of the post-Wittgensteinian, Structuralist understanding of language as constitutive rather than only expressive of meaning to the psychoanalytic situation. Not only could the meaning of dreams, symptoms, and all manner of irrational phenomena be interpreted, as Freud discovered, and be assigned a meaning conformable to the meanings of apparently rational psychological manifestations; and not only was this meaning to be obtained through the reading of the unconscious as a kind of text; but even more hermeneutically wonderful, the meaning of the irrational and rational phenomena alike was to be found manifest in the analytic discourse, or at least as readable therein as the discourse of the other. For this meaning was to be understood as a feature of the discourse (for instance, its discontinuities, ellipses, redundancies, and so on), not something the discourse referred to or signified. The signifier in its autonomy enacted the intentions of the other, the true subject.

What is crucial is that Lacan has found a way to circumvent the epistemological problem of knowledge of an object. For the signifier is not an object to be known by the subject, nor merely a symbol used by the subject to represent something, but rather what constitutes the subject’s being in the symbolic order. As usual, Lacan finds this discovery too already spelled out in Freud: “ce cela qu’il nous propose d’atteindre, n’est pas cela qui puisse être l’objet d’une connaissance, mais cela, ne le dit-il pas, qui fait mon être . . .” (*Écrits I*, p. 287). And what makes the subject’s being is readable especially in inadvertancies and aberrations, rather than

in that part of the subject's being which is under conscious control and made to conform to all manner of social codes, effacing the subject's subjectivity. Of that which makes my being " . . . il nous apprend que je témoigne autant et plus dans mes caprices, dans mes phobies et dans mes fétiches, que dans mon personnage vaguement policé" (p. 287).

Lacan's privileging of the signifier, and his rendering it autonomous with respect to the signified, mark a further step away from any scientific knowledge of objects; now intentional objects—meanings—are no longer sought out, any more than phenomenal objects or objects existing in the world. The signifier as the instigator of the encounter and, with it, of its participants, the subject and the other, tells all. Nothing is prior to it; there is no *a priori*. Indeed, as Lacan's account of the child's break from the original union with the mother's body and entry into the realm of symbol and the Law suggests, signification is a lack and originates in a lack, and in this sense is autonomous, that is, not bound to reality or an object, but to an absence. By this means, Lacan achieves a total hermeneuticization of the subject as a signifying subject (what Kristeva will develop in the concept of the speaking subject). The subject treated no longer as a "signifié" but rather identifiable exclusively in the signifier is totally accessible. There is now no disparity, not even a distinction in principle, between the meaning of subjective experience and its interpretation; the two coincide absolutely in the autonomous act of signifying.

Nevertheless, the signifier, though it is autonomous and conjectural, is not aloof or "uninterested" with respect to people and their problems. On the contrary, the signifier constructs the subject through the discourse of the other on the basis of a whole reservoir of subjective meaning. Indeed, the knowledge which Lacan (and, according to Lacan, Freud) attains to is emphatically not a knowledge *only* of the signifier, purely formal, leaving the concrete and existence out of account. Freud's statement (quoted above) conceding that psychoanalysis no more than any science attains to the real sells Freud's own work short in Lacan's estimation. For Lacan believes that psychoanalysis in surmounting the subject-object dichotomy in its "intersubjective logic" actually affords hermeneutic access to "being": "Freud par sa découverte a fait rentrer à l'intérieur du cercle de la science cette frontière entre l'objet et l'être qui semblait marquer sa limite" (*Écrits I*, p. 288). In positivist science, objects are taken as givens and themselves give no clue about being itself from which they have emerged; but the constraints of such a framework are removed in psychoanalysis. In psychoanalysis, the whole depth of being is in question and can be probed. Subjectivity and objectivity are functions of concrete discourse, which is itself a function of nothing specified in advance, not delimited by the conditions of the possibility of becoming an object of knowledge, hence open to and revealing being.

Lacan's talk about being is likely to seem vague and mystifying. But being, too, for Lacan has the formal precision of the signifier: "Il s'agit ici de cet être qui n'apparaît que l'éclair d'un instant dans le vide du verbe être, et j'ai dit qu'il pose sa question pour le sujet." Being is only what appears as a flash in the void of the word "to be," and it appears as a question to a subject which is constituted by this signifier, that is, by this question which is posed "à la place du sujet . . . avec le sujet" (*Écrits I*, p. 280). We might add that it is just "la lettre" which constitutes "l'autre" and "l'être" so far as they are subjectively meaningful—and nothing else is intended.

It must be conceded that Lacan's theories are hermeneutic in only the most radical sense. Hermeneutics often implies an endeavour to homogenize discourses, to find a master vocabulary that permits all different speakers to understand each other. In this respect, hermeneutics stands in opposition to post-structuralist approaches to language and discourse, which stress rather the discontinuities as decisive, and which deconstruct meanings as metaphysical illusions, typically turning to ridicule the hermeneutic compulsion to find meaning. Lacan fully embraces the post-structuralist insights into the instability and elusiveness of meaning. He himself is fond of pointing out the way that the signified ceaselessly slips and shifts beneath the signifier. Yet, in a Nietzschean spirit, he affirms the fluctuating difference which inhabits meaning, and just as the genealogist reevaluates values, so the Lacanian analyst assists the subject to restructure his/her personal history. What has importance in both instances is not factual accuracy *vis-à-vis* the past, but a meaning constituted in the concrete discourse of an analytic or a textual situation and its "full word." This sort of experience is still hermeneutic—involving meaning within the experience of the subject realized linguistically—in the radical sense, though it is opposed to certain more conservative forms of hermeneutics that conceive of original meaning as objectively recuperable.

Of course, Nietzsche's is a desubjectivizing hermeneutic. To the extent that Nietzsche has a teaching, it teaches "How one becomes *what* one is" (*Ecce Homo*; emphasis added). Yet even this tends to converge on Lacan's hermeneutics of the subject in the strategy of reading the style of unconscious desire. Both thinkers place us before the question, "What is subjective meaning or personal expression?" Traditionally, such subjective concepts have been understood in proprietary terms as designating what belongs to the individual subject. Now that such philosophical entities as the *cogito* have been dispossessed and deconstructed, has the vocabulary of the personal and subjective become meaningless? Or has its meaning not been rather mobilized? Lacan and Lacan's Freud rehabilitate a discourse of the "true subject." What has changed is that subjectivity is no longer a submerged underneath of discourse, a hidden person covertly impinging on the verbal surface from behind the scenes. Subjectivity

passes to the surface; it is manifest in the play of signifiers. We might say that this play of the surface is exactly what subjectivity is, if it were possible to say what anything dynamic like play or subjectivity *is*. Precisely in the style of discourse, and only there, can what is unique and individual be expressed. This is where Lacanian psychoanalytic hermeneutics meets Nietzschean genealogical interpretation as well as Spitzerian stylistics. Because of style, a subjective differentiation at the level of the signifier, we can say: "Individuum non est ineffabile." And since whatever can be spoken can be interpreted, this implies that there can be a hermeneutics of the subject.

Notes

- 1 Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, translated by J. Strachey (New York: Avon, 1953), p. 35.
- 2 Paul Ricoeur, *De l'interprétation: essai sur Freud* (Paris: Seuil, 1965), p. 75.
- 3 Sigmund Freud, "The Unconscious," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 14, p. 168; quoted in French translation in Ricoeur, *De l'interprétation*, p. 135.
- 4 Freud, "The Unconscious," p. 166; quoted in Ricoeur, *De l'interprétation*, p. 137.
- 5 Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, *The Freudian Subject*, translated by Catherine Porter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), p. 3.
- 6 Jacques Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p. 24; quoted in *ibid.*, p. 4.
- 7 Sigmund Freud, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, in *Standard Edition*, Vol. 23; quoted in Anthony Wilden, *Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968), p. 199.
- 8 Sigmund Freud, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, translated by J. Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1949), p. 30.
- 9 "L'insistence de la lettre dans l'inconscient (ou la raison depuis Freud)," in *Écrits I* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), p. 284.
- 10 Julia Kristeva, *La révolution du langage poétique* (Paris: Seuil, 1974).
- 11 "Fonction et champ de la parole et du langage," in *Écrits I*, p. 169.
- 12 Michel de Certeau, "Lacan: An Ethics of Speech," *Representations*, 3 (1983): 24.

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