

A Turn of Reading

“You prove to me that you have read my Ecrits, something that people, since they get to hear my lectures, apparently do not deem necessary.”

Lacan, “Radiophonie,” *Scilicet* no. 2/3, p. 55

The publication of *Ecrits* has been, as Lacan indicates above, a demand to be read.¹ Now it so happens that, after all, this reading still remains to be done. The time of reading is always late, and that of Lacan does not escape this rule; and even less so because in his case the rule has probably been accentuated by all that which, in and around *Ecrits*, may have converted demand into desire, that is, delayed or forbade the reading itself: the authority of psychoanalysis (which is not without mystery), the founding of an *Ecole*, and finally, the production, or the repetition of these same effects by Lacan’s speech.

What will matter here is not the fulfillment of desire—settling the *meaning* of Lacan—but rather attempting to obey the double law by which this “text” offers itself to be read while constantly derailing or deferring the conditions of its reading. At the same time, we hope to show that it is actually impossible to avoid the detour of reading—in the most simple and most patient sense of the term—even if that means overflowing, little by little, its unique and forced course, *reading* itself becoming that very overflowing of the text read in (or by) the reading text.

Such a reading is not without “reasons,” even if there can be no simple justification for a gesture which necessarily overflows itself, and first overflows the order and the authority to

which traditional *commentary* is submitted (which does have its reasons, if only one, and that reading knows, but is not the only one to know...). This is why we will not hesitate to reveal, as one ought, at least a few of our “reasons”—even if this means pretending to anticipate what will only *turn up* in the course of reading.

Why (and therefore how to) read Lacan? Why (how to) read *a text* of Lacan?

There is no doubt that to read Lacan is first of all to read that discourse by which the question of a genuine relation of psychoanalysis to the “theoretical” order in general has (finally) been raised.

Indeed, prior to Lacan, we know (but we should say that for the most part we owe him that knowledge...) that science and philosophy—or the authorities constituted under these names—divided their “reception” of psychoanalysis between a few traditional attitudes: silence (misrecognition or denial), open hostility, annexation, confiscation, or dedication to the immutable ends of this or that theoretical apparatus. More precisely, nothing has been thought which does not take the form of a “reception,” that is to say the subordination of psychoanalysis to a ground, a justification, a truth—that is, most of the time, to a norm.²

Freud himself—in spite of his claims as to the revolutionary character of psychoanalysis—kept it essentially in the status of a regional science which is submitted, or ready to be submitted to theoretical jurisdictions other than its own.³

Lacan’s intervention has consisted in breaking with the system of the “reception,” precisely to make psychoanalysis itself intervene in the theoretical field—going so far as to propose something of a new course for the entire configuration of the one and the other, and of the one in the other.

In fact, it was first a question, as we know, of redressing or rectifying psychoanalytic practice, insofar as, once it returned from its exile from Europe, it was following the path of a

“reinforcement of the ego”⁴ under the aegis of Anglo-American pragmatism and psychologism, that is, following the path of the reinforcement of the resistances of “narcissism” or the sum of its “imaginary identifications,” and insofar as its political and social finality was that of the “bleeding heart liberal,” European style—in the sense of Jasper’s “understanding,” and “half-baked personalism.”⁵

In order to remove psychoanalysis from this orthopedic function, it was necessary that it be attuned to itself once again. And this is why the practical task implied a theoretical reconstruction. At least this is the way Lacan’s discourse establishes itself: according to the system of an articulation of the “theoretical” with the “practical,” and according to the movement of a reconstitution of proper identity, through a return to origins.

We know the main features of this establishing: in order to be articulated, Freud’s truth required recourse to sciences other than those which seemed to delimit its field (biology and psychology). In order to constitute psychoanalytic discourse in general it was thus necessary to build a whole system of borrowings which appealed to linguistics, structural ethnology, and combinatory logic. Yet, this very procedure rendered necessary the discourse about its own legitimacy, that is, an epistemological discourse—or rather, to the extent it constituted not only a science but a new scientificity, a discourse *on* epistemology. And the whole operation ultimately represented an explicit passage of the psychoanalytic discourse through philosophical discourse—the very passage that Freud never practiced *as such*, even though he always evoked or indicated it implicitly.

Thus we must take this passage into consideration, on the condition, however, that we understand one another.

This does not mean that it is a question of appraising the modalities of this passage in order to evaluate its legitimacy or measure its pertinence. This would imply that we have some-

thing like a *truth* of Freud at our disposal. Not only will our reading not be guided by anything of that sort, but it will not even refer to the proper domain of psychoanalysis itself and still less to its practice—or as Lacan calls it, the “clinic.”⁶ If this is the case, (and this situation is certainly not without paradox), it is no doubt for reasons of competence—but it is also, and first, by virtue of Lacan’s very text, and of the philosophical passage (the passage through the philosophical) which takes place therein.⁷ The “Freudian truth”—a formula we will return to—does not occur elsewhere than in this very text: one cannot presuppose it, only decipher it. In a way, as we will see, it is only beyond itself that this work will open onto a reading of Freud, and to a much greater extent than it had in fact expected.

One must consequently examine what analysis produces when it passes into the theoretical field, in order to be able to ask about the stakes of an enterprise which presents itself less in a subordination to the “theoretical” than as an *intervention* into the theoretical, from an “outside” which aims to interrogate and challenge [*arraisonner*]⁸ theory itself.

One could, most certainly, conduct this study on the entirety of Lacan’s work—which would amount to presuming a readable or rather visible system as such, apart from the diversity of the texts of which it would be the locus. We will treat of the question of a Lacanian systematicity (at least with in *one piece* [*écrit*]), in due time. However, in order to begin our reading, there need be no other assumptions than those of Lacan himself, specifically:

—the will to displace (or overcome?) the systematicity of theoretical discourse in the name of a Freudian revolution imposing “the necessity of humbling the arrogance of all monocentrism.”⁹ Thus Lacan is able to declare that “[his] statements have nothing in common with a theoretical exposé justified by a closure;”¹⁰

—the will, consequently, to produce each intervention as an accomplished unity of speech, or of text, which gathers the

entire stakes of the work in each enunciation, and defers in the same gesture the totality of statements.

It is thus preferable to read *one* text of Lacan. This means that it is preferable to read, in a sense, *each* of his texts as a focus of concentration and an agency of repetition of all the others; and it is preferable to read *one* text as the singular text that it wants to be, with what such a will cannot fail to connote: the resource of the event, of circumstantial enunciation and therefore, of speech.¹¹

What will be at issue is the deciphering of what *happens to* [arriver à]¹² the theoretical, in a mode which seeks to be novel. The reading will engage a “text,” whose proper status and system it at first ignores, and which must be questioned—if indeed it can still be made the object of a question—with respect to its nature as well as its stakes as a text.

In other words, this reading will seek to follow that twist [tour] where any “question” of reading is swept away: What are the stakes of Lacan’s text (?) —is it even a *text* (?) —in what sense, if we can speak of “sense” here (?) and to what extent?

We will read “The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud.”

This text¹³ stands out with respect to its date and its circumstances. Delivered and written in 1957, it takes place near the middle of a period during which, between two successive exclusions carried out by the established psychoanalytic societies, Lacan’s work produced its most evident disruptions in the field of psychoanalytic practice as well as in psychoanalytic institutions. The same year saw, in the preceding issue of the journal *la Psychanalyse*, the publication of the cardinal text which was to open the *Ecrits*: the “Seminar on the ‘Purloined Letter’.”¹⁴

In his *Agency*, Lacan poses this letter (borrowed from Poe for his audience of psychoanalysts) for a university audience composed of the students of the Sorbonne who invited him.¹⁵ Therefore, this is Lacan’s first true intervention in the Univer-

sity, in a certain way a symbol—if not the very act—of the passage into the theoretical (should we go so far as to say: theoretical *acting out*?¹⁶). In “The Agency,” psychoanalysis articulates its own theory in the theoretical field considered as such—or rather it articulates itself with theory. We will see how this work must be read as *the text of articulation*.

Such is, in any case, the position that the preamble—which was written for publication—imparts to it. And it is by deciphering briefly the basics of the preamble that we will begin our reading—through this pre-text which is itself Lacan’s reading of the *occasion* of his discourse, or the inscription of the discourse in its occasion.

This inscription occurs in a threefold register:

1. “The Agency” is an academic discourse—or at least addressed to academics according to the *universitas* of a certain communication—that of the “necessary generality” (*E.*, 494/147) presupposed as soon as Lacan no longer addresses himself solely to professional analysts. At the same time, the discourse is specified by the “literary qualification” (*E.*, 494/147) of the audience. Thus what the university designates as *humanities* [*lettres*], and in particular as literature will prove suited to the Lacanian elaboration of the “letter.”

2. It is at the same time a scientific discourse—or at least, and more broadly, a discourse held in the order of knowledge, with the aim of being a discourse on a certain *truth*. In any case it is a discourse of a certain “veracity.” In the preface of his address, Lacan immediately dismisses *bad (false)* received knowledge, in particular the ethnolinguistics of Sapir and Jespersen: his avowed goal is the denunciation and refutation of any “false identity” (*E.*, 494/147) of psychoanalysis.

3. Consequently, this discourse is *also* a discourse for psychoanalysts (and, as such, a “training” discourse) but only through the mediation, if you will, of the two other discourses. This mediation gives the occasion of his discourse, the “expediency” of which Lacan was aware, its entire weight. The “*universitas litterarum*,” where a certain knowledge of the

humanities is communicated, is the place Freud intended for the preliminary training of the analyst, and it is from this place that the discourse can claim to exhibit “the true” identity (*E.*, 494/147) of psychoanalysis.

What is principally at stake, then, is a discourse attending to the demands of the *universitas* and of science. Lacan’s text inscribes itself as a *discourse*, within and between its lines. If Lacan was able to say, “I always place buoys by which one can navigate in my discourse,”¹⁷ this is because it is possible—if not easy—to find the point and itinerary of the concept (of the properly conceptual procedures, importations, or productions).

Is it not somewhat paradoxical that this text, a text devoted to the subversion of the “classical” authority of discourse, should itself reconstruct another classical discourse? Even so we still have to read this paradox. To this end we cannot shrink from an academic reading, that is, a *commentary* with all the heavy, unrewarding, reductive, exhausting aspects it may have with respect to the most salient effects of Lacan’s teaching. At least in this way we can be sure that its most decisive determinations will not be overlooked either through excess or default.

Lacan’s “text,” then, finds its primary status for us in this system, which suits the formula and form [*tour*] of the “textual commentary.” This is why we will begin by commenting on the first part of the exposé (“The Meaning of the Letter”), where the theory of the letter is established.

But beyond this commentary, the point will be to decipher what can only appear as a *repetition* of the first part in the two following parts (“The Letter in the Unconscious” and “The Letter, Being, and the Other”), a repetition destined to allow the articulation of the theory of the letter with psychoanalysis itself. This is, as we will see, the articulation of Saussure and Freud, which is itself articulated, in the last analysis, on yet another level—or by another character, another proper name, which will appear in time. Our reading will consequently

complicate its form [*tour*] in accordance with this play of repetition and articulation.

This means that it will have to deal, in particular, with what Lacan's preamble sets forth as the twofold or mixed character of his address.

In effect, Lacan tells us, his address is not "writing" for writing "is distinguished by a prevalence of the *text*," and the *text*—that "purveyor of discourse" [*facteur du discours*], which remains suspended between the postman and the mathematical parameter and whose "meaning" is promised by the lecture itself—is itself specified by a "tightening up...which leaves the reader no other way out than the way in" (*E.*, 493/146). One understands, to the extent that the "text" allows, that the word *text* here includes the sense of the ideal (of the absolute) of *discourse*, in the constraining necessity of its conceptual process and in the remainderless circularity that results from it—and that this ideal must not "prevail."

The address will thus be between "writing and speech," for the latter's "different techniques are essential to the formative effects I seek" (*E.*, 494/146). Consequently, it will be necessary to read that which, halfway between the two, diverges from the text and disrupts it. It will be necessary to read *between* hearing (the discourse) and reading (the text). For our reading, Lacan's *text*, or at least what we will interrogate as such, in the "strong" sense of the word (but precisely here in the sense least determinable by a discursive logic of meaning), will have to be sought in that gap, or as that semi-absence which emerges in the process of reading between the lines—or rather between sentences. More exactly, perhaps, the question of the *text* will have to become that of the gap or of the non-gap, in Lacan's address, between discourse as heard (as understood, as deciphered, or perhaps as believed) and the text as read.

Our commentary, *in turn*—a reconstruction and transcription in a resolutely manifest discourse—will of course have to be destroyed.¹⁸ We did not submit to its movement simply to

resign ourselves to it, and it is by “working” the results of the commentary in order to exceed (in every sense of the word) its status that the reading, by submitting to the complex motif of the “Lacanian text,” must be risked—without us being able to indicate in advance what *twist* [*tour*]*—that is, what text—*such a destruction could produce, nor whether it will occur *because of* or *despite* Lacan’s text, or according to some other more complicated figure.

In this process, we will finally have to recognize that our reading must consequently go through the deciphering of a certain play of *metaphor* in Lacan’s text. It is precisely that metaphor which, in the epigraph of the preamble (*E.*, 493/146), governs, from the outset, the entire text of *The Agency*.

Borrowed from de Vinci’s *Prophesies*, this epigraph belongs to a collection of texts—of a conventional genre—whose titles constantly function as metaphors of the content of the prophesies. Here the “children in swaddling clothes” metaphorize a servitude, itself marked by the enslavement of one language to another, which reduces the first to the partial muteness of a “language” of passions. The prophesy is thus, for Lacan, a metaphor or an allegory of *both* the unconscious as language *and* of the social (and psychoanalytic—in the sense of psychoanalytical cures of “false identity”) repression of this very unconscious—or even of the truth which Freud’s and Lacan’s work articulates.

The address establishes that the unconscious only produces its “meaning” in metaphor. Thus Lacan’s text guards itself, in the epigraph, against that which it must exhibit and work. The traditional situation and function of an epigraph is that it only becomes readable in the course of the text. But that this readability leads us back to the very (metaphorical) functioning of the epigraph, or to a *literality of metaphor*, is what seems to seal the course of Lacan’s discourse *in* this very trope. Consequently, the last “state” of Lacan’s “text,” which will command the last turn of reading, will have to be this sort of generalized metaphoricity, or identification with (and of) metaphor.

For now, we will simply take the occasion to inscribe the epigraph of our reading, without yet giving a verdict on its functioning:

We are obliged to operate with the scientific terms [*Termini*] that is to say with the figurative language proper [*die eigene Bildersprache*] to psychology (or more precisely to depth psychology). We could not otherwise describe the processes in question at all, and indeed we could not have become aware of them. The deficiencies of our description would probably vanish if we were already in a position to replace the psychological terms by physiological or chemical ones. It is true that they too are only part of a figurative language, but it is one with which we have been long familiar and which is perhaps a more simple one as well.¹⁹

It is presumably possible now, to begin reading (again).

The first moment, that of the commentary—if we can borrow a formula which was produced elsewhere with the aim of naming the Lacanian theory as a whole,²⁰ will be that of *a logic of the signifier*.

Notes

1. Cf. as well in *Scilicet* no. 1 (Seuil, 1968), “La méprise du sujet supposé savoir,” and “Raison d’un échec.”

2. Of course one must exclude from this evocation those already engaged in a subversion of theoretical authority as such, whatever their relations to psychoanalysis might have been: above all, Georges Bataille, whose name will appear in our reading.

3. No doubt this is only Freud’s most *manifest* discourse, and furthermore the effects of a certain deliberate *prudence* in that discourse itself. But we are not undertaking here to *read* Freud.

4. “La psychanalyse et son enseignement,” *Ecrits*, p. 454. Cf., the entirety of this text. The references to the *Ecrits* refer to the

complete edition published by Seuil (collection “Le champ freudien”) in 1966. They will henceforth be noted as *E.*, and will not be footnoted when they concern the text we are reading: everything that follows assumes that one could reread that text at any time.

T.N. Page references to the original *Ecrits* will be immediately followed, when appropriate, by reference to the pagination of the English translation edition, Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans., Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977).

5. “La science et la vérité,” *E.*, p. 867.

6. This is the proper limit of our reading which was set in place earlier. Thus nothing will be prejudged with respect to Lacan’s more specifically “clinical” discourse. We will only decipher what subsequently makes possible (according to a procedure which remains to be analyzed) the determination of the “clinical” in and through the theoretical discourse, the theory of psychoanalysis and psychoanalysis as theory. But it goes without saying—given, precisely, the comprehensive stakes of the Lacanian operation—that this limit is not one in the sense that we would only “treat” “one aspect” of that operation. If the pure jurisdiction of the theoretical must be blurred, neither must we recognize its *alter ego*: what would seek to present itself as the pure authority of the “practical” in itself.

7. This is how Lacan himself specifies his *Ecrits* in relation to his teaching as a whole: they “seek to pin down the essential subject matter of the seminars,” and “what is more they introduce what is essential in this material in the context of an epistemological critique of the current psychoanalytic view on the domain being studied.” [An interview with Jacques Lacan in A. Rifflet-Lemaire’s *Jacques Lacan*, trans., David Macey (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), p. 252].

8. T.N. *Arraïsonnement* is how some French translators of Heidegger have rendered *Gestell*. It includes the sense of putting something in question.

9. “Radiophonie,” *Scilicet* no. 2/3, p. 73.

10. In an interview with Rifflet-Lemaire, *Lacan*, p. 252.

11. The locus of Lacan’s discourse is the seminar, and not the “written”: we will have the opportunity to insist on this again. When we speak about Lacan’s *discourse*, one must always understand both the theoretical determination of the locus as well as the link of con-

cepts, and “discourse” in the linguistic sense of “extended speech.” (Cf. R. Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans., Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), p. 15.

12. T.N. *Arriver à* can mean either “to arrive at,” “to reach,” or “to happen.” Consequently it means here both what arrives at the theoretical as well as what happens to the theoretical.

13. Which Lacan recalled later several times with a certain insistence. Cf. in particular “Radiophonie,” and “Lituraterre” in *Littérature*, no. 3 (Larousse, 1971), p. 5: “Could it be a dead letter that I put in the title of one of those pieces I have called *Ecrits*... “The Agency of the Letter,” as reason of the unconscious?” Let us indicate very briefly that this is not a reason to privilege this piece of writing. In several respects, other writings are no doubt as least as important in the Lacanian apparatus (for example, “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” “The Signification of the Phallus,” and “The Subversion of the Subject”). Still, these texts are hard to read with respect to the discourse that underlies them without the *The Agency*. Moreover, our reading applies to *The Agency's* theoretical *property* (and not to its theoretical “privilege”)—to the proper turn that the theoretical takes there.

14. This text, issued from a 1955 seminar, carries however, as Lacan notes, the marks of the theory as was elaborated at the time of its writing, which slightly precedes that of *The Agency*.

15. Cf. *E.*, 908.

16. T.N. “*Acting Out*” in English in the original.

17. *Radiophonie*, *Scilicet* no. 2/3, p. 13.

18. As for the *commentaries* which have been produced on Lacan up to now, one should say, at least, that they have remained unaffected by the “text” they set out to interpret or repeat. It goes without saying that we do not speak here of those texts or essays which, while expressly presenting themselves under Lacan’s constant authority, if not as a “repetition” of his themes, still did not claim to be commentaries: for example, “De la structure en psychanalyse,” by M. Safouan, in *Qu’est-ce que c’est le structuralisme?* (Seuil, 1968).

19. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), trans., James Strachey, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psy-*

chological Works of Sigmund Freud (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), XVIII, 60, translation slightly modified). Henceforth Freud's *Standard Edition* will be cited as *S.E.*,

20. J.-A. Miller—"La suture. Elements pour une logique du signifiant," *Cahiers pour l'analyse*, no. 1. Except for its brevity, this formula follows Lacan to the letter: cf., for example, *E.*, 468 and 469.