

Interpretation in Reverse

JACQUES-ALAIN MILLER

You're not saying anything?

Oh, I am, I am saying something. I am saying that the age of interpretation is behind us.

This is what everyone is saying, though they don't know it yet. And this is why these *Journées* on interpretation needed an interpretation.

The age of interpretation is behind us. Lacan knew it, but he did not say it: he hinted at it [*il le faisait entendre*], and we are just beginning to read it. We talk about "interpretation," we use the word all the time; it ensures that the "history" of psychoanalysis lives through us. But we say "interpretation" in the same way that we say the unconscious, no longer thinking of consciousness and of refuting it. The "unconscious," "interpretation," these are the words of the tribe under the cover of which the new sense, advancing in disguise, creeps in.

What is the unconscious? How are we to interpret this concept now that we no longer relate it to consciousness, but rather to the function of speech in the field of language? Do we not all know that the unconscious is wholly situated in the space [*decalage*] that is repeatedly produced between what I want to say and what I do say-as *if* the signifier deflected the programmed trajectory of the signified, which provides the material of interpretation-as *if* the signifier had a way of interpreting what I want to say. This is the space in which Freud situated what he named the unconscious-as *if* another wanting-to-say [*vouloir-dire*], that of the signifier itself and which Lacan designated as "the Other's desire," substituted itself for my wanting-to-say, which is my "intention of signification."

This is so simple! So well known! So why did it take so long for the conclusion inscribed by these statements [*ces dits*] to come to light- namely, the conclusion that interpretation is nothing other than the unconscious, that interpretation is the unconscious itself? If Lacan does not include interpretation among the fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis, is it not because interpretation is included in the very concept of the unconscious? Does the equivalence between the unconscious and interpretation not emerge at the end of the Seminar *Desire and Its Interpretation*, with the paradox that unconscious desire *is* its interpretation? Is the equivalence unconscious/interpretation not what is restated in the form of the concept of the subject supposed to know? And because I say it once more today, will it be taken on board at last?

It is a lure, and even an impasse, to unilateralize interpretation on the side of the analyst, as his intervention, his action, his act, his statement [*son dit*], his saying [*son dire*]. People have probably been too fixated on the *speech act* of the analyst to notice the equivalence I

mentioned between the unconscious and interpretation—here the time for comprehending has unduly prolonged itself.

Analytic theories of interpretation merely attest to the narcissism of analysts. It is time to conclude. Interpretation is primarily the interpretation of the unconscious, in the subjective sense of the genitive—it is the unconscious that interprets. Analytical interpretation comes second. It takes its bearings on the interpretation of the unconscious, and this accounts for the erroneous belief that it is the unconscious of the analyst that interprets.

When people fail to start from the premise that the unconscious interprets, they always end up by making an object-language of the unconscious and a metalanguage of interpretation. Yet interpretation is not stratified in relation to the unconscious; interpretation is not of another order—it is inscribed in the same register and is constitutive of this register. When the analyst takes over [the task of interpretation], he does not do anything else than the unconscious. He takes over from the unconscious. Except that he takes interpretation from the *wild* state it proves to be in in the unconscious to the *reasoned* state where he strives to bring it.

Introducing resonances [*faire résonner*], alluding, implying, being silent, being the oracle, quoting, being enigmatic, half-saying things, revealing—but who does this? Who does these things better than you do? Who handles this rhetoric as if by birth, while you exert yourselves to learn its rudiments? Who, but the unconscious itself! The whole theory of interpretation has only ever had one goal—to teach you to speak like the unconscious.

What is the minimal interpretation, the “I could not have put it better myself” [*je ne te le fais pas dire*]? It simply amounts to putting what is said [*le dit*] in quotation marks, to decontextualizing it in order to make a new sense emerge. But is this not what the unconscious of the dream does, as Freud discovered with what he named “the day’s residues”?

The unconscious interprets. And the analyst, if he interprets, interprets in its wake. In the end, there is no other avenue than identifying with the unconscious itself. It is the principle of a new narcissism, which is no longer that of a strong ego. “You’re not saying anything?” Quite. To be silent here is a lesser evil. Because all the unconscious ever did is interpreting, and as a rule it does it better than the analyst. If the analyst is silent, it is because the unconscious interprets. And yet the unconscious also wants to be interpreted. It offers itself for interpretation. If the unconscious did not want to be interpreted, if the unconscious desire of the dream was not, in its deepest phase, a desire to be interpreted—Lacan says so—a desire to make sense, there would be no analyst.

Let us go along with the paradox. The unconscious interprets and it wants to be interpreted. The contradiction only exists for a rudimentary concept of interpretation: interpretation always calls for interpretation. To say it otherwise: to interpret is to cipher. But to decipher is to cipher again. The movement only stops on a satisfaction. This is exactly what Freud says when he inscribes the dream as discourse in the register of the primary process, as a wish fulfillment. And Lacan deciphers it for us by saying that

jouissance lies in ciphering. But then—how does jouissance lie in ciphering? What is its being in ciphering? And where does it dwell in ciphering?

Let's say it abruptly, as befits these brief communicatins that bring style and spice to these *Journées*—there is nothing in the structure of language that enables us to respond accurately to this question, we adjust this structure.

Last year I fatigued the audience of my course by taking them along the meandering path Lacan took when he tried to integrate the Freudian libido within the structure of language—more precisely, [he tried to integrate it] in the locus of the signified, giving jouissance, if I may so, the very being of sense.

Jouissance, *sens joui* [enjoyed sense]-the homophony Lacan surprises us with in his [text] *Television* is the very principle of the program inaugurated, if not by "Function and Field of Speech and Language," at least by his deciphering in "The Agency of the Letter." This program is to reduce libido to the being of sense.

I have [already] punctuated the main moments of this elaboration; there are five. The final moment is the very disqualification of object *a*. What Lacan christened *objet petit a* is the ultimate waste of a grandiose attempt, the attempt to integrate jouissance in the structure of language—even if it meant extending this structure to the structure of discourse.

Beyond this, another dimension opens up where the structure of language itself is relativized and merely appears as an elaboration of knowledge [*savoir*] on *lalangue*. The term "signifier" fails to grasp what is at stake since it is designed to grasp the effect of the signified, and it struggles to account for the jouissance produced. From then on, interpretation will never again be what it used to be. The age of interpretation, the age in which Freud turned the universal discourse upside down by means of interpretation, is over.

Freud started with the dream, which has always lent itself to interpretation. He moved on to the symptom, conceived on the model of the dream, as a message to decipher. On his way he had already encountered the negative therapeutic reaction, masochism, and the fantasy.

What Lacan continues to call "interpretation" is no longer the same, if only because it is not indexed on the symptom but on the fantasy. And we keep saying that the fantasy is not to be interpreted but to be constructed, don't we? The fantasy is a phrase that is enjoyed [*qui se jouit*], a ciphered message that harbors jouissance. The symptom itself is to be thought from the fantasy, and this is what Lacan calls the *sinthome*.

A practice that targets the *sinthome* in the subject does not interpret like the unconscious. To interpret like the unconscious is to remain in the service of the pleasure principle. To place oneself in the service of the reality principle does not change anything, since the reality principle itself is in the service of the pleasure principle. To interpret in the service of the pleasure principle—you needn't look anywhere else for the principle of interminable analysis. This is not what Lacan calls "the way to a true awakening for the subject."

It remains for us to say what interpreting beyond the pleasure principle could be—interpreting against the grain of the unconscious. There, the word "interpretation" is only valid as a place-holder for another, which cannot be silence. Just as we must abandon the symptom as reference and use the fantasy instead, to think the symptom from the fantasy, so we must abandon neurosis and use psychosis as reference, to think neurosis from psychosis.

The signifier as such, that is, as cipher [*chiffre*], as separated from the effects of signification, calls for interpretation as such. The signifier on its own is always an enigma and this is why it craves interpretation. This interpretation requires the implication of another signifier, from which a new sense emerges. This is the structure I highlighted at the Clinical Section of Buenos Aires, in a colloquium on delusion and the elementary phenomenon.

The elementary phenomenon is a particularly pure demonstration of the presence of the signifier all alone, in sufferance—waiting for the other signifier that would give it a meaning—and as a rule the binary signifier of knowledge appears there, which in the event does not conceal its delusional nature. It has a perfectly good name: the delusion of interpretation. This is the way of all interpretation: interpretation has the structure of delusion, and this is why Freud does not hesitate to put the delusion of Schreber and the theory of the libido on the same plane, without any stratification. If the interpretation that the analyst has to offer the patient is of the order of delusion, then indeed it is probably better to remain silent. This is a cautionary maxim.

There is another way, which is neither that of delusion nor of the silence of prudence. We will continue to call this way "interpretation," although it no longer has anything to do with the system of interpretation, save for being its reverse side. To say it with the concision required by these *Journées*, the other way consists in withholding S_2 , in not bringing it in—so as to circumscribe S_1 . It amounts to bringing the subject back to his truly elementary signifiers, on which he has, in his neurosis, had a delusion.

The unary signifier, which as such is nonsensical, means that the elementary phenomenon is primordial. The reverse of interpretation consists in circumscribing the signifier as the elementary phenomenon of the subject, and as it was before it was articulated in the formation of the unconscious that gives it the sense of a delusion.

When interpretation emulates the unconscious, when it mobilizes the subtlest resources of rhetoric, when it molds itself onto the structure of the formations of the unconscious, it feeds the delusion that it should be starving. If there is deciphering here, it is a deciphering that does not produce sense.

Psychosis, here as elsewhere, strips the structure bare. Just as mental automatism exposes the fundamental xenopathy of speech, so the elementary phenomenon is there to manifest the original state of the subject's relation to *lalangue*. The subject knows that what is said [*le dit*] concerns him, that there is some signification, although he does not know which one.

This is why, at this point precisely, as he advances in the other dimension of interpretation, Lacan resorts to *Finnegans Wake*, namely, to a text that unceasingly plays on the relations between speech and writing, sound and sense, a text full of condensations, equivocations, homophonies, but nevertheless has nothing to do with the old unconscious. In *Finnegans Wake*, every quilting point is made obsolete. This is why, despite heroic efforts, this text can neither be interpreted nor translated. That's because it is not itself an interpretation, and it wonderfully brings the subject of reading back to perplexity as the elementary phenomenon of the subject in *lalangue*.

Let's say that in the text, S_1 always absorbs S_2 . The words which would translate its sense into another language are as if devoured in advance by this very text, as if it was translating itself. Consequently, the relation between signifier and signified does not take the form of the unconscious. You will never be able to separate what Joyce wanted to say from what he said—this is integral transmission, but in a mode that is the reverse of the matheme.

The *zero effect* of the elementary phenomenon is obtained here through an *aleph effect*, which opens onto the infinity of the semantic, or, better, onto the flight of sense.

What we still call "interpretation," although analytic practice is evermore post-interpretative, is revealing no doubt, but of what if not of an irreducible opacity in the relation of the subject to *lalangue*. And this is why interpretation—this post-interpretation—is no longer, if we are to be precise, a punctuation.

Punctuation belongs to the system of signification; it is still semantic; it still produces a quilting point. This is why the post-interpretative practice, which takes over from interpretation on a daily basis, takes its bearings on the cut rather than on punctuation.

For now, let us imagine this cut as a separation between S_1 and S_2 , the very one that is inscribed on the bottom line of the matheme of the 'analytic discourse': $S_2 // S_1$. The consequences are fundamental for the very construction of what we call the analytic session. The question is not to know whether the session is long or short, silent or wordy. Either the session is a semantic unity, in which S_2 comes to punctuate the elaboration-delusion in the service of the Name-of-the-Father (as many sessions are)—or the analytic session is an asemantic unit returning the subject to the opacity of his *jouissance*. This implies that it be cut before it can loop back upon itself. So here I am opposing the path of perplexity to the path of elaboration. Don't worry about elaboration; there will always be too much of it.

I propose that these *Journées* reflect on the following: properly analytic interpretation—let's keep the word—functions against the grain of the unconscious.

This is a summary of one of Jacques-Alain Miller's responses to questions from the audience: We begin from Serge Cottet's spot-on diagnosis—"the decline of interpretation"—that I picked up on last year in his presentation at the Clinical Section. He signaled some difficulties that he situated in the order of a certain symptom. I tried to bring out the good side of this "decline," for the term echoes darkly with "grandeur and decadence." I placed what at first sight appears as a decline of interpretation in a positive light. I sublimated this decline into

a post-interpretative practice. When did this practice start? With Freud himself, it is impossible not to see that.

Author's note: I had initially announced this text in the program for the Journées under the title "The Other Side of Interpretation." I presented it in three sentences: "Interpretation is dead. It will not be resuscitated. if a practice is truly contemporary, it is ineluctably post-interpretative although it does not really know it yet." This oral communication was designed to unsettle the average opinion, to produce surprise. It did do that, and more. Did this amount to success? Perhaps not. Some, turning around, drowned the essence of this communication (on this point, see my first thoughts: "L'oubli de l'interprétation" in La lettre mensuelle No. 144, December 1995, pp. 1-2). This text was transcribed by C. Bonningue. I read it and made few corrections.