Psychoanalysis as anti-hermeneutics

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1. With Freud

Many of Freud's statements run counter to the inclusion of his work in hermeneutics. I have insisted, for a long time, on the absolute priority given to method. Before being identified as a clinical practice or a theory, psychoanalysis is first defined as 'a procedure for the investigation of psychical processes, which are otherwise hardly accessible'. This method is constantly defined as analytical, associative-dissociative; 'free association' (freie Assoziation) or 'freely occurring ideas' (freie Einfälle) are only the means employed for the dissociation of all proposed meaning. An analytical method, then; one that is supposed to conform to the object it posits – the 'representation' termed 'unconscious'. Because of the very mode of our access to it, we are entitled to postulate the absence, in this object, of any synthetic meaning.

Now, in a complementary manner, Freud ceaselessly turned out declarations opposed to any kind of synthesis. On the one hand, no synthesis was to be found in the id, which was governed by coexistence without coherence; on the other, the analyst had to be content with analysing, without proposing any kind of 'psychosynthesis' to the patient. This question receives belated, important clarification in the 1937 article 'Constructions in Analysis'. Freud no longer denies the fact that analysis can lead to partial and provisional constructions, as stops on a journey. The latter are, moreover, only brief reconstructions of historically well-defined chains of meaning. But the place he assigned Konstruktion allows Freud to give free passage to Deutung – interpretation – which is defined, in opposition to reconstructive synthesis, as taking one element at a time; that is, simply replacing a missing link in the associative-dissociative chain. Any search for meaning, or comprehension, is sent...
packing by this quasi-mechanistic, associationist definition. In this connection I would point out that Freud makes use only of the term Deutung, whereas the hermeneutists speak of Auslegung or Interpretation. Although I am aware of the etymological roots of deuten, the Freudian Deutung seems to me rather to bear the trace of the form deuten auf – to point out, to isolate a separate element: that is, analysis again and again.

Over and above these terminological questions, I would otherwise stress the idea that psychoanalysis is not the system of stereotypical interpretations to which it is too often reduced by certain of its adepts, to the great advantage of its detractors, who have things made very easy for them.

My argument will appear historical. My claim is that in the decade following 1900, psychoanalysis underwent a change which was as important as it was disastrous, with the appearance of the reading codes whose names are symbolism and typicality. Two of the principal testimonies to the antecedent period and its anti-hermeneutic methodology are the Studies on Hysteria (1895) and The Interpretation of Dreams (in its 1900 edition, before the addenda to later editions, which were characterized precisely by the arrival of reading codes). From the methodological point of view it is interesting to follow the path of the cases in the Studies, or again, the famous dream of Irma’s injection, which functions as a paradigm in The Interpretation of Dreams. Here Freud presents us with twenty pages of association, of deciphering – but without any codes, certainly without any one-to-one correspondences; twenty pages of unbinding (Entbindung) operating on the more or less coherent narrative of the dream. The associative pathways are followed, the points of intersection are noted, but no synthesis is proposed. The chapter ends with deceptive abruptness: ‘I have now finished the interpretation of the dream ... it becomes obvious, the dream is the fulfilment of a wish.’

Let us insist on this historical point: that in 1900 the analytical method is already complete; and that it is not in any sense a translation, a comprehension or a reading. The method consists in ‘de-translation’, on the track of elements described as unconscious (at this point Freud speaks of memories, or rather, of reminiscences). To be sure, this is not to say that no synthesis is produced; but it is a synthesis which is purely spontaneous, and above all, individual: as in chemistry, the analysed elements tend to recombine. But there are no pre-established codes for a re-translation.

Certainly, this original moment of Freudian method will soon be concealed. Very quickly, so-called psychoanalytic codes will come into play, under two banners: the ‘symbolic’ and the ‘typical’. The symbolic, linking the symbol and what it symbolizes in a fixed manner, will only be developed in the later editions of the Traumdeutung. Freud will go so far as to talk in this respect of a ‘fundamental language’. As regards the typical, it initially concerns dreams whose manifest content corresponds to a quasi-universal scenario. In fact these typical dreams occupy only a minor place in 1900, which is considerably amplified thereafter: dreams of nakedness, of exams, of the death of loved ones (which of course lead to the ‘discovery’ of the Oedipus complex). Subsequently, the great schemas of the typical ensue – the great ‘complexes’, foremost among them the ‘castration complex’. Later on, the mythology of the two mighty instincts will surge, Life and Death. And after Freud such grand organizational synthesizes will continue to proliferate – for instance, Melanie Klein’s schema of the depressive position, or the function of the Law and Castration in Lacan.

Let us pause at this moment, when the typical and the symbolic first appear. Freud saw this as a fundamental discovery, perhaps the only real addition to his doctrine. Moreover, the discovery concerned both the level of content (which would be universalized) and that of method. Alongside the step-by-step method of individual free association, something called a ‘symbolic method’ was proposed: a sort of reading-off, or good translation. Symbolism versus association: my question is, do these amount to parallel, or even complementary methods, as Freud wished? Or are we dealing rather with two antagonistic vectors, precisely those of anti-hermeneutics and hermeneutics?

There is a clear opposition between the two: (1) The symbolic method translates the manifest discourse of the dream at first sight, preserving its coherence, and, in the end, trusting in it; it transposes one narrative into another. By constrast, the associative method subjects the manifest narrative to dissociation without giving it the least credence. (2) The two methods are not in a cooperative relationship, because, according to Freud, when symbolism speaks, associations are silent. Indeed, it is the obstacle constituted by the so-called ‘mute elements’ which dictates the use of symbolism. Freud lays emphasis on this, without trying to explain it. To make things clearer, I will mention a dream, included in the 1900 edition – the ‘man with a hatchet':
A ... man who had been seriously ill for a year, reported that when he was between eleven and thirteen he had repeatedly dreamt (to the accompaniment of severe anxiety) that a man with a hatchet was pursuing him; he tried to run away, but seemed to be paralysed and could not move from the spot. 5

I do not intend to summarize the interpretation of this dream, but merely to underline the paradox it presents. Before 1900 Freud takes this narrative element by element, without concerning himself with the scenario, and according to the classical unbinding method. The pathways of association eventually lead him to infantile scenes, to the observation of a violent parental intercourse.

Not for a moment does Freud read what would immediately strike the contemporary 'psychoanalyst' on reading the manifest dream: 'castration', the typical infantile scenes, to the observation of a violent parental intercourse. Before 1900 Freud takes this narrative element by element, without concerning himself with the scenario, and according to the classical unbinding method. The pathways of association eventually lead him to infantile scenes, to the observation of a violent parental intercourse.

To summarize my examination: this is a dream which would have to be considered typical, and read thanks to the key 'castration'. But Freud deliberately avoids the latter notion. And on the other hand, he does not register the so-called silence of associations, supposed to strike the subject when his dream is governed by symbolism. To conclude, then: reading through symbolism and typicality does not stimulate the associative method. When one is present, the other is absent, and vice versa.

All this leads to the formulation of a hypothesis: it is symbolism which silences association. And to go further: synthesis -- encoded thought -- is on the side of repression. In the analysis of the 'man with a hatchet', it is because Freud refuses to discover castration, as synthetic scenario or 'complex', that he is able to pursue the analytical method.

The discovery of castration was, however, to be pursued in the history of psychoanalysis -- to the point, perhaps, of completely invading it and occluding everything else. The major turning point is the analysis of 'Little Hans' from 1906 to 1909. My ironic name for the theory constructed at this stage is the theory of Hans and Sigmund. It is Hans who implements the fable that is 'sexual theories of children'. Sigmund adopts it, tidies it up, and gradually begins to claim that it is universal. I will say a few words about this theory which was supposedly to become a psycho-analytical theory.

What is a theory for? To master an enigma, which the adult world offers to the child. At the outset, this enigma is not sexual difference, but the difference between genders.6 The baby does not perceive an anatomical differentiation; but he very quickly notices that the human species is divided into two kinds or genders [genres], according to habits, appearance, behaviour, function, and so on. There must be, behind this, an enigmatic, masked difference immediately presented by the adult as a message to decipher. The theory of castration would account for this enigma, by symbolizing it in a coded system. This code is founded on anatomy, and functions as a binary myth, ±. To sum it up: in the beginning, all humans had a penis; then some had it cut off, not others; but these others remain threatened with such a fate. Incidentally, this is a theoretical inversion of biological theory, where the initial sex is feminine, only becoming masculine due to a supplementary hormone. It is a phantasmagoric and contingent theory. Even by 1915, Freud will still consider it as being far from universal. For their part, ethnologists, even psychoanalysts such as Roheim and Bettelheim, will show that there are far richer and more complex ways of symbolizing the difference between genders.

It was not until much later that Freud was to proclaim the universality of the 'castration complex', with all the difficulties its application entails, especially in the case of girls. Only with Lacan will this universality be posited as an a priori -- and this in the name of a metaphysical turn which desexualizes everything: castration becomes the signer of human finitude, a finitude which we must all assume; and this becomes the goal of psychoanalysis...

To stress the ethnological contingency of the myth of Hans and Sigmund is not to play down its importance. It introduces what I have termed a phallic logic, a binary logic of 'plus' and 'minus'. The oft-praised assumption of castration is not some grandiose amor fati; it is directly linked to the expansion of binarism, the foundation of the modern occidental world. But despite the irresistible conquest of the world by binarism, it is worth recalling that this expansion remains contingent, in relation to so many civilizations whose founding myths are not binary but plural -- accepting ambivalence instead of staking everything on difference.

To conclude this quick Freudian and anti-Freudian tour, I will insist once again on the fact that the original discovery of Freud is that of a method. An unprecedented method, it is linked to something equally unprecedented, the foundation of the psycho-
analytic situation. For where in the world, before psychoanalysis or beyond it, was one permitted and invited to say everything, up to and including the most secret thoughts of carnage, racism or rape? It is a strictly individual method, favouring an individual’s way of connecting things, element by element, through ‘associations’, to the detriment of all self-construction and self-theorization. The method is ana-lytic in the true sense of the term, associative–dissociative, unbinding. One might call it ‘deconstructive’ – and the term Rückbildung is certainly there in Freud – if the word had not subsequently been monopolized, adapted by a philosophy elsewhere.

The refusal of synthesis, before being a virtual moral rule for Freud (the refusal of suggestion, the refusal of imposing his own ideas, even psychoanalytic ones), is a methodological abstention. Its profound maxim is that where one follows the path of synthesis, one silences the unconscious. Now, this discovery is masked, concealed, by the return of synthesis, of ‘reading’, of hermeneutics. The latter first takes the name of typicality and symbolism, soon spreading out into the great ‘complexes’. Thus we end up with all the supposedly psychoanalytic myths which encumber us.

It is not that there is no question, with complexes and myths, of discoveries which are partly psychoanalytic. But these discoveries are wrongly situated: obscuring the unconscious in psychoanalytic theory, just as they obscure it in the human being. They are transformed into something which can be used by the human being to master enigmas.

2. The problem of hermeneutics within the framework of the general theory of seduction

Some preliminary remarks.

1. The preceding clarification, however radical it may be vis-à-vis a conception of psychoanalysis as a putative hermeneutics, remains ‘regional’: confined to a particular sector of human knowledge. The aspiration to the universal and the fundamental cannot be based only on a sanitization of Freudian psychoanalysis, from a methodological viewpoint. Its only possible foundation is a theory of the human being; evidently developed on the basis of Freudian discoveries, but also of their concealment.

2. The elaboration of what I term the ‘general theory of seduction’ has taken precisely this path: the rediscovery of the ‘seduction theory’ Freud formulates around 1895; and the detailed exploration of its concealment around 1897. What is rather hastily called ‘the abandonment of the seduction theory’ cannot be thought in terms which remain limited to a simple empirical confrontation with the facts, from which theory would emerge defeated. This Freudian theory contained a germ of truth, but one which was insufficiently elaborated, and consequently marked by weaknesses, failures to realize its general import and to focus on what was essential. This is not the place to repeat the process of elucidation which has led me to its generalization, in the epistemological sense of the term.

3. These concomitant concealments – that of the seduction theory, and that of the individual method, in favour of a return of hermeneutic reading via symbolism, typicality and complexes – must obviously be profoundly linked. I will not be able to explore their links here, but they can easily be identified.

4. In presenting the general theory of seduction, I would rather talk of translation than reading, interpretation or comprehension. There are many reasons for this.

In the first place, we always set out from a meaning which is expressed, expressed to someone else – from a message. This message is expressed in a ‘language’, if one gives this term its general sense of semiological system (and not the restricted sense of verbal language). It seems to me, furthermore, that the hermeneutic movement, in rewriting its history during the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries (and it does so ceaselessly), too often neglects another history, which is however closely linked to that of interpretation – the history of translation and its theory (as charted by Antoine Berman in L’épreuve de l’étranger2). The knotting together of translation and hermeneutics is doubtless obvious in a Schleiermacher. It remains to be seen whether reading and interpretation constitute a category broader than that of translation, or whether, rather, they could be subsumed by a general theory of translation. Lastly, I privilege the notion of translation because it is well suited to the development of what I call the ‘translation model’, in a theory of the reception of the other’s message, which is also a theory of repression. Hermeneutics, translation, theorization – these are different facets of the same activity: the reception of the other’s message.

I thus come back to the general problem of hermeneutics, to state, within the framework of the general theory of seduction, a fundamental proposition: the only genuine, originary hermeneutist is the human being. Every human being. In this, I am in part approaching a Heideggerian perspective: at the
fundamental level, hermeneutics cannot be imported from the outside, like a specialized discipline. It can only be a hermeneutics of the human condition, practised by the human individual. But my thesis will be elucidated in a way which is profoundly different:

(1) The object of the proto-comprehension or proto-translation is not a situation but a message. How, in fact, could a situation become the object of a translation? There is no interrogation of the human condition which is not propelled by the message of the other. The great, fundamental questions – Where do we come from? Where are we bound? What does gender mean? etc. – only reach the individual as questions posed by the other. Which individual? Which other?

(2) The agent of this proto-translation is not an adult man, situated here and now, a cogito or a Dasein. Heideggerianism, along with the entirety of hermeneutical thought, bears the seal of reflexive thinking – what I term Ptolemaic thinking, which is the mode of thought par excellence of the adult closed in upon himself. Originary translation is, then, performed by the child, the nursling baby. And let us add, for good measure: the baby that has no unconscious.

With this last remark I run the risk of causing adequate of any philosophy of the subject permanently to shut their ears. ‘To have an unconscious’: what on earth can this naive psychological realism mean? Does one have an unconscious like a bag of nuts or a bundle of twigs? But even worse, in their eyes, would be to centre things on the baby, or on the adult–baby situation. And if in fact our access to it can only be external, through a reconstruction based on memories or empirical observations, how is this return to childhood to escape the charge that its nature is ontic, purely worldly, and that therefore it is to be challenged as ‘fundamental situation’? Simple Cartesian doubt would do the job!

Without wishing to go into my justification here, I will set down its principle: the situation of originary translation links up, as if from the inside, with the unique experience inaugurated by Freud: the analytical situation. What bears witness to childhood ‘seduction’ is analytic ‘seduction’, which we call ‘transference’. The originary situation (reactivated in the analytical treatment) is thus not – I am there, in place, and I interpret; but rather – the other addresses me, in an enigmatic way, and I (the baby, the analysand) translate.

A few comments, then, on these ‘enigmatic messages’ which the adult addresses to the child. I describe them as ‘enigmatic’ in a very precise sense – not to designate them as mysterious, hard to get at, or inexplicable. But in a sense which is double, to the extent that the adult for his or her part ‘has’ an unconscious, which is especially stirred up by the relation to the small child which he or she once was. These messages are most often non-verbal – acts of care, mimicry, gestures; but sometimes verbal, too. Messages which I describe as ‘compromise formations’ [compromis] in that they do not only transmit their manifest meaning, but are also made into compromises by unconscious signifiers. This is exactly the same compromise formation which Freud showed at work in bungled actions, slips of the tongue (Versprechen), of the pen (Verschreiben), etc. They are enigmatic for the receiver only because they are enigmatic for the sender of the message.

I see no better model for the reception of those addresses (Anreden) than that of translation. Translation functions according to more or less elementary codes, furnished initially by the cultural world, but also by physiology or even anatomy. What is more – and this is crucial – only one side of the originary translation is clarity, elucidation and mastery; it also has a negative side, for translation is always at the same time a failure of translation – that is, repression, the constitution of the unconscious from what translation deposits as waste.

What, then, would a psychoanalytic practice of hermeneutics be? The application of a new code to an old one, subjecting the manifest to ‘rereading’, can only amount to the redoubling of repression. My critique is not directed, principally, at so-called analogic or Jungian interpretation; it is too easy a target, whose critique could become an alibi for more subtle forms of hermeneutics, which even the master himself, Freud, came to support.

However, beneath the flood of supposedly psychoanalytic, secondary theorizations, the method and the analytic situation remain there, rock-like, to remind us of the heterogeneity of the unconscious to all systems. What does this method do? Motivated by the field of the transference and the reactivation of the relation to the enigma (that posed by the psycho-analyst), it de-translates, by association–dissociation and by Deutung, the manifest translations. On its journey, it often stumbles across layers of old translation, which it makes sure to reconstruct; always, though, pushing on further ahead the tracking of unconscious residues.

Let us recall the use of the metaphor ‘key’ in hermeneutics. And let us also recall Freud’s examination and critique of the classic and popular interpreta-
tion of dreams with ‘keys to dreams’. This is: that the key which opens, also – and above all – closes. The psychoanalytic method, in its originary moment, works not with keys but with screwdrivers. It dismantles locks, rather than opening them. Only thus, by breaking and entering, does it attempt to get at the terrible and laughable treasure of unconscious signifiers.

The only hermeneutist is the child, then the analysand. We do not have to make him into a Freudian, Kleinian or Lacanian hermeneutist. He will manage quite well enough on his own when it comes to hermeneutics, in his incorrigible yearning for synthesis, despite all the efforts of analysis.

I will conclude with a rapid consideration of the status of theory in psychoanalysis. It seems indispensable here to distinguish two levels, clearly designated by the titles of two of Freud’s works: ‘The Sexual Theories of Children’ and ‘Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality’.

The first level, which I will call for convenience Level I, is that of the theories discovered in the human being by psychoanalysis. These are ideologies, myths, cultural formations which, as such, can be neither refuted nor endorsed by psychoanalysis. They are what critics of psychoanalysis most often choose to attack – and not without justification, because the majority of psychoanalysts have made them their own theories. It is rather like claiming to refute ethnology by demonstrating the phantasmagoric and contingent nature of some American Indian myth... My reference to ethnology is itself, moreover, not contingent: psychoanalytic ‘discoveries’ concerning mythical theories tie in at numerous points with ethnological discoveries. As for the function of these theories, we place ourselves broadly in agreement with a Lévi-Strauss, when he says that they ‘diminish intellectual, and if need be, existential, anxiety’.12 We would only add that this existential anxiety is correlative to the attack by the message of the other: first, the human adult other (der Andere) and then the other thing inside us (das Andere: the unconscious).

I would place in opposition to this Level I a Level II, that of specifically psychoanalytic theory, also called metapsychology. Like all theory, it can only be constructed in an attempt to account for an experience: in the first instance, the experience of the treatment (its situation, its method, and its object). It is the theory of repression, of the genesis of the unconscious, of its manifestations, of its nature. Psychoanalytic theory, as it is described at Level II, can claim to be open to refutation and falsification. The fact that it does not make use of models from physics or mathematics does not exempt it from submitting to the trials of reason and a confrontation with experience.

However different, even heterogeneous, these two levels of theory are, there exists between them an essential practical link: the theory at Level II aims to account for an experience and a praxis, and, conversely, it offers to guide that praxis. Now, one of the goals of Theory II is to give an account of the function of Theory I (myths and ideologies) in the human being, and especially in the process of repression. In this sense, and if the treatment offers to undo repression, at least partially, its maxim can only be: hands off to any interference of ‘psychoanalytic’ theories – or, rather, ideologies – in analytical practice. Hands off, in the treatment, to hermeneutics, to our hermeneutics! This is a regulatory watchword which can only be observed asymptotically; and whose alternative formulation could be the ‘refusal of knowledge’ (Versagung des Wissens) on the part of the analyst.

9–10 August 1994

Translanted by Luke Thurston

Notes
3. ‘To show coram populo’: the same root as deutsch.
6. [The French word genre means both ‘kind’ or ‘sort’ in general, and ‘gender’ in particular. Translator]
8. ‘Und vieles! Wie auf den Schultern eine! Last von Scheitern ist! Zu behalten.’ [And much like a burden of firewood on one’s shoulders is to be kept.] Hölderlin, Mnemosyne, Stuttgart Ausgabe, 2, 1, Klostermann, p. 197.
10. Cf. above, pp. 8–9: the enigma of genders is translated according to the ‘castrating’ code, which is at once anatomical and cultural.