

## Interpretation: “Apophantic” and “Oracular”

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According to Lacan, Freud borrowed the term interpretation from other fields as “scattered as the oracle and the outside-discourse of psychosis.”<sup>1</sup> In *L'Étourdit*, he indicates that interpretation is “apophantic” and “oracular.” Here, he seems to want to reconnect with the practice of the “former masters of truth,” those of ancient Greece. This is something we find in Lacan going back to the “Report to the Congress in Rome.” The analyst is a “master of truth.” And even toward the end of the *Écrits*, the oracle remains an example for interpretation. In “Direction of the Cure”: “The analyst is the interpreter who decides from his oracle, the only master on board . . .,”<sup>2</sup> or, further on, stressing the scope of Freud’s mantic of interpretation in “the rat man”: “hardy in his mantic scope,” and he then compares Freud to Tiresias: “these lines of the destiny of the subject divined.”<sup>3</sup> And, again, this: “If the analytic experience finds itself implicated in taking its claims to nobility from the Oedipal myth, it is because it preserves what is decisive in the enunciation of the oracle. And I would say more: interpretation still remains at the same level here; it only remains true from what follows from it, just like the oracle. Interpretation is not the putting to the test of a truth which would be decided by yes or no; it unleashes the truth as such.”<sup>4</sup>

“Master of truth,” thus, like the mythic divine. Which does not fail to surprise us, if we compare it with what Lacan writes in *L'Étourdit*, having underscored the “apophantic and oracular” character of interpretation: “If the said (*le dit*) (ideally the analysand’s first-leap) is always posed as truth . . . the saying (*le dire*) (what returns to the analyst, that is) is only coupled by ex-sisting there, that is, by not being of the dit-mension of the truth.” Is there a contradiction

here? If through his *dire* is the analyst is “master of truth,” he should certainly be able to command it. And he can only in fact do this with a *dire* ex-sisting to the *dits* that seek to untangle the true from the false. Perhaps this is how we can understand what Lacan says on the next page: “The *dire* comes where it (the real) commands it (the truth).”<sup>5</sup>

## **Aletheia**

But in all this, what truth are we talking about? The truth the analyst unleashes through his *dire* has nothing to do with the truth of classical logic, which says that the true is opposed to the false. The analyst’s *dire* liberates it precisely from this opposition of the true and the false and, more or less, from objectivity and exactitude.

In psychoanalysis, in analytic discourse, the truth can be true and false, deceptive and fugitive. It is left to function in this duplicity. Moreover, it is an impassioned relationship with the truth of classical logic — where the true is opposed to the false, where, as Lacan says, “the false is not only perceived to be the underside of truth, but it designates it as well”<sup>6</sup>— that psychoanalysis resolves for the neurotic who comes to experience it. For from his experience, Lacan tells us in *Encore*, we can presume that he constitutes for himself a knowledge of the truth. And what psychoanalysts must know about this knowledge of the truth is that it can only be half-said. This is what the written form of analytic discourse indicates to us: the Knowledge, S<sub>2</sub>, of the analyst is at the place of the truth. The neurotic who submits himself to the analytic work wants to find the hidden truth, which he supposes known, as his movement toward analysis indicates, in interrogating a master he fabricates. He believes in a truth that is already there and in which he is alienated. In fact, he interrogates the truth of his structure in aiming for this master’s knowledge. And we can in fact presume that the analyst, in disengaging him from this

supposition of knowledge, is going to shake up this truth for him and set a limit to its scope. Even in going through an experience where we are attached to saying it by speaking, we never obtain it in its entirety. There is a remainder.

Lacan, in a note to the *Écrits*,<sup>7</sup> says that the sentence “*Woe es war, soll Ich warden*” equates Freud with the pre-Socratics and he remarks that it was not without reason that Freud looked to the pre-Socratics, “in his eyes, the only ones capable of testifying to what he rediscovered.”<sup>8</sup>

What did he in fact rediscover among these practitioners of speech, if not that the truth is first of all in speech, that every truth is an enigma and every speaker of truth speaks equally enigmatically? For the analyst does not fulfill this function for consultants, for questioners who can on occasion be analysands and analysis is not a resurgence of this ancient oracular practice. However, master of his oracle, when he speaks in the treatment, “his words undergo a transmutation through the analytic operation that confers on them an effect of interpretation,” Lacan says. These words constitute a sign of the truth. The transmutation is the transformation of the signifier into a sign. Through the analytic operation, certainly, but also because the speech of the analyst is an act. It is assertive, just like the oracle of Heraclitus “which neither reveals, nor conceals, but makes a sign.” This is what gives it its mantic scope, the same scope as the speech of Nereus, a mythic divine, the “old man of the sea,” who incarnated this power in Ancient Greece.

Knowledge and mantic words are affirmed in a certain conception of the truth: that essential quality of *aletheia*, where the contraries are complementary and make it eminently ambiguous.

The divine, possessor of the mantic knowledge, is a master of *Aletheia*. This is how Tiresias is designated in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. His knowledge is insured by *Aletheia*, by the truth he lets speak through his mouth, and of which he is simply the instrument. This truth that comes into play in mantic speech holds to *Diké*: what is said most correctly. It is also obliterated by *Apaté*: no truth without deception. It is also defined by *Peitho*, which confers on it another kind of ambiguity, that it didn't already have, the ambiguity inherent in the power of persuasion, the power of the rhetorician. It complements *Léthé*, forgetting, to which it is opposed antithetically. Forgetting prevents it from saying everything. *Léthé* renders it not-all, half-said, to again take up Lacan's expression. It is also enigma: when Heracles wants to interrogate it in interrogating Nereus, the old man of the sea, Nereus escapes, metamorphoses, transforms himself in a thousand ways, from flame to a watery wave; he is ungraspable. He throws off truth's chains, after a fashion.

This truth that Lacan makes speak, isn't it in fact this assertive truth of mantic speech, which is not opposed to the lie, which neither proves nor demonstrates itself, and which never opposes the true to the false? In it, the true never denies the false, the game of alternation between the truthful and the deceptive, these two strictly opposed things that turn around each other render it deeply ambiguous. "Underside (*Envers*) is assonant with truth (*vérité*)."<sup>9</sup> In the oracle, the divine affirms. His speech is an act. For, in effect, it affirms without confirming, it is declared, proclaimed, and only owes its virtue and its efficacy to the act itself of proffering.

This is how it is apohantic; it answers assertively, without proof, most often with brief formulas; it presents the truth without facilitating its reception. The apohantic is said in the present: a present outside of time, the present of the moment, which encompasses that "which has been, which is, and which will be."

Let us again add that this efficacious speech of the oracle “realizes,” which is to say, causes: “in that it is not the reflection of a pre-established event, but one of the elements of its realization.” In other words, it founds a fact, it installs the “Real,” it is only verified by what follows. The action it causes it what verifies that it was true. This could be written S/x; in x, the consultant can lodge his desire. And then it gives a sign: it wakes us up and, of course, it does not seek assent. Structurally, it has nothing to do with exactitude. And what is more, being an attribute of the oracular function, it is not the manifestation of an individual thought, of an ego. It is also defined by *Pistis* (the tie of fidelity between Homeric warriors): it founds a link between the oracular interpreter and the consultant on “a necessary and constraining agreement, a mutual assent to *Aletheia*.” Thus, it proceeds from the mantic speech to which Lacan returns with insistence in *L'Étourdit*. It treats interpretation precisely as a *dire*, in the relation of the *dire* to the *dit*, which it demonstrates to be apophantic from having the most direct link with what, in the analysand’s discourse, is precisely not modal — as it is, on the contrary, in any demand — but of the order of unconscious desire. The interpretation would owe its apophantic character to the apophantic nature itself of the unconscious *dits*. This is how it realizes the apophantic. This *dire*, he says, “only proceeds from the fact that the unconscious is subjected to the equivocate.” Interpretation must therefore answer to this necessity of the equivocate.

## **The Oracle**

All the characteristics he gives here for the *dire* of interpretation, adding that it is owed to sense (*sens*) and not to signification — since it must allow gripping a Real with sense — are those of the oracle.

An oracle is in fact only spoken by the equivocal, of which Lacan specifies three forms in homophony, the grammatical equivocal, and the logical paradox.

The response of the oracle is not generally understood, or is understood too late, when the event it has founded by its *dire* is charged with clarifying it for you. Its adequacy is only revealed *a posteriori*, after the fact, and until then, the oracular speech retains the character of an enigmatic sign. Moreover, oracles are only related to the more-than-perfect: “If I had only known!” The oracle’s answer is given in an encrypted language — it is up to the consultant to know how to read it. It has a structure of fiction since it can take the form of an absurd, fictive narrative. If it does not clarify, we could say that it misleads.

Here are some examples borrowed from R. Crahay:<sup>10</sup>

“A General is heard declaring that he will dine or lodge in the city he besieges. He will dine or lodge there in fact, but as a prisoner.”

“An oracle had told Cleomenes that he would take over Argos. He conquers the Argosian army on the grounds of a small sanctuary which bears name of the hero of Argos. He renounces taking the city of Argos, thinking the oracle is already fulfilled with the taking of the sanctuary.”

“Arcesilaus, exiled king of Cyrenus, consults the oracle on his return: “You, once you have returned to your country, do not be concerned if you find the oven full of amphoras; do not cook the amphoras, but let them depart with the first good wind . . . “

In these three examples, we can recognize three kind of equivokes: one based on a logical paradox, one on homophony, and, finally, a riddle (*une énigme*).

As a matter of interest, let us cite what R. Crahay notes concerning the attitude of the consultant: “He is closed to the revelation, he neglects it, does not understand it, usually chooses the false term if there is an alternative; he forgets the oracle. By some futile or presumptuous

questions, the consultant shows that he is not receptive. The oracle eludes these questions. He himself asks another more pertinent question, he stands his ground. Sometimes, he does not respond.

We see, from these examples, that the one who gives the oracle “neither reveals nor hides”: the response is separated from any intention, it is delivered. If there is an enigma, there is no veil. The truth, *aletheia*, is declared without proof, in an apophantic manner. It is an activation (*mise en fonction*): it is up to the consultant to make it hold to the real. It makes a sign: “To the good listener, welcome!” It is up to this listener to make of the oracle the cause of his desire.

We now understand a little better why Lacan refers interpretation to this source, and why he situates interpretation between enigma and citation. Which he gives as two examples of a half-saying (*mi-dire*) that constitutes a sign, while specifying that the minimal interpretation is “I do not make you say it,” equivocating between “you said it” and “it is not I who am saying it.”

Beginning with citation: the analyst scans the signifier in placing it between quotation marks. He cites a statement, indicating in this way that there is an author, a subject supposed to have stated it.

A statement (*Enoncé*) without its share of enunciation.

With this  $S_2$  of a statement, if we can say this, he reinforces the proof of division, the  $- \phi$ , the link of the subject to the Other of Discourse, as a place of repressed knowledge. He reinforces the experimental alienation of the treatment.

With the enigma, “an enunciation culled from the weave of the analysand’s discourse,” whether or not a question of the analysand, which it restores to him; it leaves him in charge of producing the statement of knowledge attached to it. With this S<sub>2</sub> of enunciation, the analyst confronts the analysand with the lack in the Other.

It is astonishing, moreover, that enigma and citation can provoke the two operations of the subject’s causation, alienation and separation. Citation supports the subjective division, –  $\phi$ , and the enigma can provoke the effect of separation between the subject and knowledge, and its corollary, loss, **a**. This latter operation can also arise from the silence of the analyst, which can then be thought of as a “silent *dire*.”<sup>11</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Lacan, J., *L’Étourdit, Scilicet IV*, Paris, Seuil, 1973, p. 47.

<sup>2</sup> Lacan, J., *La Direction de la cure, Écrits*, Paris, Seuil, 1966, p. 588.

<sup>3</sup> Lacan, J., *Ibid.*, p. 597.

<sup>4</sup> Lacan, J., *Le Séminaire, Livre XVIII, D’un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*, 1970-1971.

<sup>5</sup> Lacan, J., *L’Étourdit, op. cit.*, p. 8

<sup>6</sup> Lacan, J., *L’Étourdit, Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> Lacan, J., *Écrits, op. cit.*, p. 585, note 3.

<sup>8</sup> Lacan, J., *Introduction à l’édition allemande des Écrits, Scilicet V*, Paris, Seuil, 1975, p. 16.

<sup>9</sup> Lacan, J., *Le Séminaire, Livre XVII, L’envers de la psychanalyse*, Paris, Seuil, 1974.

<sup>10</sup> Crahay, R., “*La bouche de la vérité*,” *Divination et Rationalité*, Paris, Seuil, 1974.

<sup>11</sup> References:

Detienne, M., *Les maîtres de la vérité dans Grèce archaïque*, Paris, La Découverte, 1990.

Ramnoux, C., *Études présocratiques*, Paris, Klincksieck, 1983.

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