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Introduction



The attempt to translate Lacan's French and to discuss his work in another language might well be met with a certain amount of skepticism. We usually expect from a theoretical discourse a transparency of language and a clarity of concept that in principle seems to guarantee the possibility of translation. Particularly in the realm of theory, the verbal representation is supposed to efface itself before that which it represents. We assume that an articulation in one language can be translated into another so long as the "represented" may be said to be truthful, since truth is supposed to be the same in all languages. Even if, as in recent times, we conceive of truth as being inseparable from its verbal expression, we have little doubt that its self-identity makes possible the kind of repetition in different languages that we commonly call "translation."

Why then should the attempt to translate Lacan arouse skepticism? His discourse is undoubtedly theoretical and claims not only to speak about truth but indeed to enact it. Nevertheless, what his texts give voice to and in a certain sense "stage" is not simply something represented, an object that would be self-identical, but is itself representation, translation, staging. The "object" of Lacan's entire theoretical discourse, its "sense," entails a mode of articulation which might best be described as a "slip-up" or derailing of sense: the language of the unconscious, the unconscious as language.

What distinguishes this particular linguistic form is that it never simply speaks directly (in the first or any other person) but rather misspeaks itself, concealing, denying, disavowing. Its repetition always involves distortion and dislocation. In this way the unconscious forms a language of representation that is not constituted by what it designates, but that instead always

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deconstructs the "represented," a translation without an original or, as Freud would say, another scene.

In order to demonstrate that this understanding of the unconscious as a translation without an original or as a representation without a "represented" is not simply an invention of Lacan's, but is already prescribed in the texts of Freud, it suffices to recall the description of the primary process and dreamwork in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. The "other scene" of the unconscious is governed by the primary process, which is characterized by an instability of energy cathexes (under the sway of the pleasure principle); this instability manifests itself by interacting with the censorship in dream distortions, making use of the mechanisms of displacement, condensation, and considerations of representability. Freud, though using linguistic concepts such as translation, transmission, and coding in order to describe the unconscious' necessarily distorted forms of articulation, can still be read as having never called into question the existence of an original text. For instance, his famous distinction between "latent" and "manifest content" seems to presuppose just such an original:

The dream-content seems like a transcript of the dream-thoughts into another mode of expression, whose characters and syntactic laws it is our business to discover by comparing the original and the translation.¹

A closer reading of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, however, shows that the so-called original constituted by the latent dream thoughts always takes the form of grammatically correct sentences that as such owe their structure to the secondary process of preconscious-consciousness. The primary process of the unconscious appears only in the distorting mechanisms of displacement, condensation and considerations of representability. In a long note added in 1925 to *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud stresses the importance of the dreamwork – in the sense of a distorting translation:

I used at one time to find it extraordinarily difficult to accustom readers to the distinction between the manifest content of dreams and the

¹ S. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, ch. 6, *The Standard Edition of the Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated and edited by James Strachey, [henceforth: SE], London: Hogarth, 1953–74, vol. IV, p. 277. Here and throughout, I have modified the translation when necessary.

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latent dream-thoughts. Again and again arguments and objections would be brought up based upon some uninterpreted dream in the form in which it had been retained in the memory, and the need to interpret it would be ignored. But now that analysts at least have become reconciled to replacing the manifest dream by the meaning revealed by its interpretation, many of them have become guilty of falling into another confusion which they cling to with equal obstinacy. They seek to find the essence of dreams in their latent content and in so doing they overlook the distinction between the latent dream-thoughts and the dream-work. At bottom, dreams are nothing other than a particular *form* of thinking, made possible by the conditions of the state of sleep. It is the *dream-work* which creates that form, and it alone is the essence of dreaming – the explanation of its peculiar nature.²

A dream is thus a *form* of thought and this form is constituted by the dreamwork, not by the dream-thoughts, the latent content. For any particular dream there is a manifest and a latent content, and yet this content is not the essence of the dream qua content, but only its material. Furthermore, as a result of the characteristic overdetermination of dreams, the wish realized in it is itself enmeshed in a network of other wishes, among which the infantile ones are the most decisive. This gives the ostensibly original text the character of a palimpsest, superimposed upon other texts that are both referred to and effaced by it. This double and antithetical movement, which Freud calls, significantly, “transference” (*Übertragung*), entails a process of translation which is potentially interminable and which assumes a relatively stable form only when the structures of early childhood sexuality have been stabilized through the “decline” of the Oedipus complex.

Indeed, although at times in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud seems to suggest that representations have their origin in some prior presence, upon closer scrutiny such presence reveals itself to be a representation that in turn refers to other representations. Dream images thus should not be read simply according to their “pictorial value” [*Bilderwert*], but instead according to their “sign-relationship” [*Zeichenbeziehung*]; like a rebus, this relationship treats concrete images as material that serves to signify “a syllable or word.”³

² *SE*, v, pp. 506–507.

³ *Interpretation of Dreams*, *SE*, iv, p. 278. Significantly, Freud describes the dream here as “a pictographic script,” a *Bilderschrift*.

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We thus gradually arrive at a notion of the unconscious as a movement of translation without an original, as a process of representation without a “represented,” something that, “logically” speaking, is unthinkable – whether as a substratum or as a substance. This logical scandal requires linguistic markers like the curious German prefix, *ver-*, which is found in so many of Freud’s decisive terms (*Verdrängung*: repression, *Verschiebung*: displacement, *Verleugnung*: disavowal, *Verneinung*: denial), and which prefigures the way in which those terms slip away and out of the grasp of traditional conceptual discourse.⁴ The unconscious has no identity, “is” radically other, without being *the Other* as such. Thus, when Lacan writes that “the unconscious is what one says,”⁵ we should not forget to add: insofar as one says something other than what one *means*, i.e. intends to say. For Lacan, no less than for Freud, it is never a mere accident when language and intention diverge: such divergence derives from the signifying structure of language. As a signifying medium, language *is* the articulation of non-identity and this is

⁴ The German prefix, *ver-*, stems from the Gothic, where it signifies “out,” “before,” “past,” and “away from.” The Latin *per-*, *por-*, *pro-*, as well as the Greek *peri-*, *par-*, *pro-* and *para-* belong to the same word family. In modern usage, the meaning of *ver-* points in two distinct, if interrelated directions: first, a movement *away from*, a dislodging or dislocation (as in *Verschiebung*: displacement); second, the execution or intensification of an operation (as in *Verdichtung*: literally, “thickening,” “condensation”). A word such as *Verdrängung* combines both meanings: it signifies a certain dislodging expulsion, and an intense impulsion (*Drang*, *drängen*). This etymological–lexical survey, however summary, turns out to read like an abbreviated description of the Unconscious, a word that Lacan glosses as follows: “Freud didn’t find a better one, and there’s no going back on it. The disadvantage of the word is that it is negative, which allows one to assume anything at all in the world about it, plus everything else as well. Why not? To that which goes unnoticed, the word *everywhere* applies just as well as *nowhere*. It is nonetheless a very precise thing.” (“Freud n’en a pas trouvé de meilleur, et il n’y a pas à y revenir. Ce mot a l’inconvénient d’être négatif, ce qui permet d’y supposer n’importe quoi au monde, sans compter le reste. Pourquoi pas? A chose inaperçue, le nom de ‘partout’ convient aussi bien que de ‘nulle part’. C’est pourtant chose fort précise.”) J. Lacan, *Television*, English translation by Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson, in: *October*, 40 (Spring, 1987), p. 9. French: *Télévision*, Editions du Seuil: Paris, 1973, p. 15.

⁵ Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits*, Editions du Seuil: Paris, 1966, p. 830. To avoid confusion with the French edition of the *Ecrits*, references to the English translation will be to the name of the translator, Alan Sheridan. Throughout this book, references to Lacan’s writings will be first to the English translation, wherever available, and then to the French edition, in order to facilitate consultation of the original by the reader. As with Freud, published translations will be modified wherever it is deemed necessary.

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what allows the unconscious to be described as the discourse of the Other.

In the pages that follow, this relation of the unconscious to language will be elaborated; it is of decisive importance for Lacan's entire doctrine and for the very distinctive character of its "return to Freud." Insofar as this return entails more than a mere paraphrase or translation of an "original," it calls for a reconsideration of the notion of "repetition," and of its particular relation to psychoanalysis. The processes studied by psychoanalysis almost always involve repetition, not however as a return of the same, in any simple sense, but rather as the recurrence of a difference separating that which is repeated from its repetition. An instance of this difference is provided by Freud's description of the genealogy of the wish, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, as deriving from the hallucinatory memory of an "experience of satisfaction": the hallucination seeks to repeat the remembered experience in the "identity of a perception," while at the same time confirming its absence, qua hallucination. It is this distance, between repeated and repetition, that opens the space of the wish and therefore allows the dream as such to take place.

Lacan's "return to Freud" also follows the ambivalent law of repetition. It draws attention to itself, not so much as a faithful rendering of a self-identical original, but as a turn of phrase or a trope. It is precisely the tropicality of Lacan's use of language that bars the way to any simple presentation. Lacan's "retour" is thus also a detour which describes the Unconscious not as an object, but as a movement whose trajectory it retraces. This is why Lacan's theoretical discourse is at the same time very practical, a "signifying practice" in which the laws of signification, and above all those of the signifier, are not merely objectified or named as much as staged.

Such staging, to be sure, should be identified neither with the language of the unconscious nor with so-called "free association." It remains a theoretical discourse that must be held accountable for the consequences of its conceptuality. Such conceptuality, however, challenges the conventional criteria of accepted academic discourse. In a preface to a dissertation on his work, Lacan asserts that "my Writings (*Ecrits*) are unsuitable for theses, especially academic theses: antithetical in nature,

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since one either takes what they formulate or one leaves them." (*puisque à ce qu'ils formulent, il n'y a qu'à se prendre ou bien à les laisser*).⁶ The alternative is drastic, and yet anything but simple. For to "take" to such texts is inevitably to be *taken by* them: to be moved elsewhere by a practice of language in which sense is often overtaken – *surprised* – by sound, just as *se prendre* might easily be taken for *surprendre*. To take to these texts is perhaps above all to follow the lead of such surprises, even if this means taking on more than can be reasonably reckoned with.

For if language is a condition of reason, the games it plays are not always reasonable. We can learn about them, therefore, only by playing along, at least for a while. It is only then that their sense – i.e. their direction – begins to emerge.

⁶ Cf. Anika Lemaire, *Jacques Lacan*, translated by D. Macey, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977, p. vii; French edition: *Jacques Lacan*, Brussels: Pierre Mardaga, 1970, p. 10.

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Mistaken identity: Lacan’s theory of the “mirror stage”



In “Of our antecedents,” a short note written for the publication of his *Ecrits*, Lacan comments in retrospect on his early writings:

We thus find ourselves replacing these texts in a future anterior: they will have anticipated our insertion of the unconscious in language.¹

Lacan uses the future anterior tense to describe not only his own development, but also the historicity of the subject in general, insofar as the unconscious plays a part in its constitution. In his programmatic text, “Function and field of speech and language in psychoanalysis,” Lacan writes:

What is realized in my history [i.e. in that of the individual subject] is not the past definite of what was, since it is no more, or even the present perfect of what has been in what I am, but the future anterior of what I shall have been for what I am in the process of becoming.²

The peculiarity of this future anterior tense, matrix for the historicity of the subject, can perhaps be explained best by means of a short comparison to Hegel. The (present) perfect tense is undoubtedly the temporal medium of Hegelian discourse, a discourse that presents itself as a self-realization of spirit [*Geist*]. Present in this tense is a spirit or mind that (virtually at least) has always already been perfect. Without this present tense, absolute knowledge and philosophical certainty

¹ “Nous nous trouvons donc replacer ces textes dans un futur antérieur: ils auront devancé notre insertion de l’inconscient dans le langage.” “De nos antécédents,” *Ecrits*, p. 71.

² J. Lacan, *The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*, trans. Anthony Wilden, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968, p. 63. (“Ce qui se réalise dans mon histoire, n’est pas le passé défini de ce qui fût puisqu’il n’est plus, ni même le parfait de ce qui a été dans ce que je suis, mais le futur antérieur de ce que j’aurai été pour ce que je suis en train de devenir.” *Ecrits*, p. 300.) Sheridan, p. 86.

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– i.e. scientific knowledge as such – would never have been representable in Hegel's writings. In his "Introduction" to *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel criticizes a notion of thought construed as a mere instrument, serving only to recognize something exterior to it. He concludes:

If the Absolute were only to be brought on the whole nearer to us by this agency [*Werkzeug*: instrument] [of knowledge or (re)cognition: *Erkenntnis*], without any change being wrought in it, like a bird caught by a limestick, it would certainly scorn a trick of that sort, if it were not in its very nature, and did not wish to be, beside us from the start.³

The Absolute, the mind, must then according to Hegel already be – and want to be – in and for itself with us. Without this prior presence both philosophy as rigorous science and the identity of the subject would be impossible.⁴ For how could a subject come to know itself, dialectically realize its identity, if this matrix of presence were not (and did not want to be) at least virtually already there as a form to be filled or as an interiority to be unfolded and explicated over time. The thinking subject (or thought as subject) can only come to know itself to the extent to which the form of this Self has always already been there as a *potential presence*. The course of the Hegelian dialectic may be infinite, but this infinity, according to the claims of the dialectic itself, must not be a "bad" one. Rather, it should be the self-realization of an identity that has always already been virtually present to itself. For the self-conscious mind as it is expressed and represented in Hegel's *Logic*, this in-and-for-itself-having-been-with-us [*An-und-für-sich-bei-uns-gewesen-Sein*] of the Absolute is articulated in the (present) perfect tense. The process of negation and determination, the movement of the dialectic, is defined in the *Logic* from the very start, not simply as the transitional movement of "passing by," but as the perfected past presence of a *passage*, of an *Übergegangensein*, that will have always already taken place as the determinate negation of being and nothing:

³ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. Baillie, New York: Macmillan Co., 1961, p. 132.

⁴ See: M. Heidegger, *Hegel's Concept of Experience*, trans. K.R. Dove, New York: Harper & Row, 1979.

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The truth is neither being nor nothing, nor that being passes over into nothing, nor nothing into being, but rather that *each has passed over into the other*.⁵

The history of the subject of metaphysics attaining its most powerful and complete articulation in Hegel, is conceived according to the most self-contained form of presence, that of the present (made) perfect. The temporal structure of the subject that Lacan's reading of Freud strives to articulate, stands in marked contrast to this perfected present. The perfect tense is supplanted by the future anterior, thus calling into question the very foundations of subjective identity conceived in terms of an interiorizing memory. In invoking the future anterior tense, Lacan troubles the perfected closure of the always-already-having-been [*des Immer-schon-gewesen-Seins*] by inscribing it in the inconclusive futurity of what will-always-already-have-been [*Immer-schon-gewesen-sein-wird*], a "time" which can never be entirely remembered, since it will never have fully taken place. It is an irreducible remainder or remnant that will continually prevent the subject from ever becoming entirely self-identical. In the psychoanalytical perspective, then, memory becomes something very different from what it was for metaphysics – not because of a future that the subject will never be able to catch up with fully, but because every attempt by the subject of the unconscious to grasp its history inevitably divides that history into a past that, far from having taken place once and for all, is always yet to come. Consequently, the living present [*lebendige Gegenwart*] (Husserl) of the subject emerges as a focal point whose actuality can reside in an *anticipated belatedness*.

The consequences of such belatedness can be developed through the examination of a second aspect of the future anterior, in which it is considered less as a tense, designating a future past, than as a mode, entailing a conjecture. "You will have understood Freud" (*Vous aurez compris Freud . . .*). Used this way, modally, the "future anterior" designates a surmise, a conditional prediction and hence, a proposition bearing upon an uncertain state of affairs. This uncertainty, which cannot be

⁵ Hegel's *Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller, New York: Humanities Press, 1969, p. 83 [translation altered; my emphasis].

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identified simply with a future or a past, typifies the language of a subject whose self-consciousness is structured in terms of anticipated belatedness. In accordance with the split temporality of the future anterior, this will have been subject to and of the unconscious.

This split, quasi-temporality affects not only the unconscious as an *object* of theoretical discourse, but also, and perhaps more significantly, the discourse itself. Thus, whereas Lacan stresses the conceptual character of the unconscious – “The unconscious is a concept” – the structure of this concept distinguishes it fundamentally from that of the philosophical tradition culminating in Hegel. For Lacan, the concept is construed not as the presentation of a representation in thought through the determinate negation of its properties, but rather as the vehicle of a *search*. As a concept, the unconscious is thus “forged on the trace of what works to constitute the subject.”⁶

The tendency of Lacan's earlier texts to use the conjectural quasi-time of the future anterior, thereby deferring the closure of comprehension indefinitely, suggests that the singular movement of the unconscious requires a theoretical discourse capable not merely of *describing* its trajectory, but rather of *staging* its movement. Lacan's use of the future anterior does not imply an absolute knowledge that has, is and will always have been present to itself. Rather, it returns to the *theatricality* that is so powerfully at work in Freud's writings and through which they are clearly distinguished from those of his followers. Lacan renews this Freudian tradition through which psychoanalytic writing gestures towards a stage whose borders are only provisionally determined by what is called the “reader” (or “auditor”): the difference in this case is not decisive). This “reader” or “audience,” as the provisional “representative of the other,” as Freud called *Fließ*, serves to delimit the borders of a stage that will always have been at a remove from the place we occupy as self-conscious subjects. Hence, the frequent apostrophes that give Lacan's writings a tone that is even more theatrical than it is pedagogical. For if discourse can be said to set the stage, the unconscious marks the eccentricity of its

⁶ “L'inconscient est un concept forgé sur la trace de ce qui opère pour constituer le sujet.” “Position de l'inconscient,” *Écrits*, p. 830.