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## Psychoanalysis and Education: Teaching Terminable and Interminable

*In memory of Jacques Lacan*

*Meno:* Can you tell me, Socrates, if virtue can be taught? Or is it not teachable but the result of practice, or is it neither of these, but men possess it by nature?

*Socrates:* . . . You must think me happy indeed if you think I know whether virtue can be taught . . . I am so far from knowing whether virtue can be taught or not that I do not even have any knowledge of what virtue itself is.

.....  
*Meno:* Yes, Socrates, but how do you mean that we do not learn, but that what we call learning is recollection? Can you teach me how this is so?

*Socrates:* . . . Meno, you are a rascal. Here you are asking me to give you my "teaching", I who claim that there is no such thing as teaching, only recollection.

—Plato, *Meno*<sup>1</sup>

### THE MEASURE OF A TASK

Socrates, that extraordinary teacher who taught humanity what pedagogy is, and whose name personifies the birth of pedagogics as a science, inaugurates his teaching practice, paradoxically enough, by asserting not just his own ignorance, but the radical impossibility of teaching.

Another extraordinarily effective pedagogue, another one of humanity's great teachers, Freud, repeats, in his own way, the same conviction that teaching is a fundamentally impossible profession. "None of the applications of psychoanalysis," he writes, "has excited so much interest and aroused so many hopes . . . as its use in the theory and practice of education . . .":

My personal share in this application of psychoanalysis has been very slight. At an early stage I had accepted the *bon mot* which lays it down that there are three impossible professions—educating, healing, governing—and I was already fully occupied with the second of them.<sup>2</sup>

1. Plato, *Meno*, 70 a, 71 a, 82 a. Translated by G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980), pp. 3, 14 (translation modified).

2. *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated from the German under the general editorship of James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis), volume XIX, p. 273. Hereafter, this edition will be referred to as "Standard," followed by volume number (in roman numerals) and page number (in arabic numerals).

In a later text—indeed the very last one that he wrote—Freud recapitulates this paradoxical conviction which time and experience seem to have only reinforced, confirmed:

It almost looks as if analysis were the third of those ‘impossible’ professions in which one can be sure beforehand of achieving unsatisfying results. The other two, which have been known much longer, are education and government. [Standard, XXIII, 248]

If teaching is impossible—as Freud and Socrates both point out—what are we teachers doing? How should we understand—and carry out—our task? And why is it precisely two of the most effective teachers ever to appear in the intellectual history of mankind, who regard the task of teaching as impossible? Indeed, is not their radical enunciation of the impossibility of teaching itself actively engaged in teaching, itself part of the lesson they bequeath us? And if so, what can be learnt from the fact that it is impossible to teach? What can the impossibility of teaching teach us?

As much as Socrates, Freud has instituted, among other things, a revolutionary pedagogy. It is my contention—which I will here attempt to elucidate and demonstrate—that it is precisely in giving us unprecedented insight into the impossibility of teaching, that psychoanalysis has opened up unprecedented teaching possibilities, renewing both the questions and the practice of education.

This pedagogical renewal was not, however, systematically thought out by Freud himself, or systematically articulated by any of his followers; nor have its thrust and scope been to date fully assimilated or fully grasped, let alone utilized, exploited in the classroom. The only truly different pedagogy to have practically emerged from what might be called the psychoanalytic lesson is the thoroughly original teaching-style of Jacques Lacan, Freud’s French disciple and interpreter. If Lacan is, as I would argue, Freud’s best student—that is, the most radical effect of the insights of Freud’s teaching—perhaps his teaching practice might give us a clue to the newness of the psychoanalytic lesson about lessons, and help us thus define both the actual and, more importantly, the potential contribution of psychoanalysis to pedagogy.

#### WHAT IS A CRITIQUE OF PEDAGOGY?

Lacan’s relationship with pedagogy has, however, been itself—like that of Freud—mostly oversimplified, misunderstood, reduced. The reason for the usual misinterpretations of both Lacan’s and Freud’s pedagogical contribution lies in a misunderstanding of the critical position taken by psychoanalysis with respect to traditional methods and assumptions of education. Lacan’s well-known critique of what he has pejoratively termed “academic discourse” (*le discours universitaire*) situates “the radical vice” in “the transmission of

knowledge." "A Master of Arts," writes Lacan ironically, "as well as other titles, protect the secret of a substantialized knowledge."<sup>3</sup> Lacan thus blames "the narrow-minded horizon of pedagogues" for having "reduced" the "strong notion" of "teaching"<sup>4</sup> to a "functional apprenticeship" (E 445).

Whereas Lacan's pedagogical critique is focused on grown-up training—on academic education and the ways it handles and structures knowledge, Freud's pedagogical critique is mainly concerned with children's education and the ways it handles and structures repression. "Let us make ourselves clear," writes Freud, "as to what the first task of education is":

The child must learn to control his instincts. It is impossible to give him liberty to carry out all his impulses without restriction . . . Accordingly, *education must inhibit, forbid and suppress*<sup>5</sup> and this is abundantly seen in all periods of history. But we have learnt from analysis that precisely this suppression of instincts involves the risk of neurotic illness. . . . Thus education has to find its way between the Scylla of non-interference and the Charybdis of frustration. . . . An optimum must be discovered which will enable education to achieve the most and damage the least. . . . A moment's reflection tells us that hitherto education has fulfilled its task very badly and has done children great damage. [Standard, XXII, 149]

Thus, in its most massive statements and in its polemical pronouncements, psychoanalysis, in Freud as well as in Lacan—although with different emphases—is first and foremost *a critique of pedagogy*. The legacy of this critique has been, however, misconstrued and greatly oversimplified, in that the critical stance has been understood—in both Lacan's and Freud's case—as a desire to escape the pedagogical imperative: a desire—whether possible or impossible—to do away with pedagogy altogether. "Psychoanalysis," writes Anna Freud, "whenever it has come into contact with pedagogy, has always expressed the wish to *limit education*. Psychoanalysis has brought before us the quite definite danger arising from education."<sup>6</sup>

The illocutionary force of the psychoanalytical (pedagogical) critique of pedagogy has thus been reduced, either to a simple negativity, or to a simple positivity, of that critique. Those who, in an oversimplification of the Freudian lesson, equate the psychoanalytic critical stance with a simple positivity, give

3. Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), p. 233, my translation. Henceforth I will be using the abbreviations: "E" (followed by page number)—for this original French edition of the *Ecrits*, and "N" (followed by page number) for the corresponding Norton edition of the English translation (*Ecrits: A Selection*, translated by Alan Sheridan, New York: Norton, 1977). When the reference to the French edition of the *Ecrits* (E) is not followed by a reference to the Norton English edition (N), the passage quoted (as in this case) is in my translation and has not been included in the "Selection" of the Norton edition.

4. Which for Lacan involves "the relationship of the individual to language": E 445.

5. Italics mine. As a rule, in the quoted passages, italics are mine unless otherwise indicated.

6. Anna Freud, *Psychoanalysis for Teachers and Parents*, translated by Barbara Low (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), pp. 95–6.

consequently positive advice to educators, in an attempt to conceive of more liberal methods for raising children—methods allowing “to each stage in the child’s life the right proportion of instinct-gratification and instinct-restriction.”<sup>7</sup> Those who, on the other hand, in an oversimplification of the Lacanian lesson, equate the psychoanalytical critical stance with a simple negativity, see in psychoanalysis “literally an inverse pedagogy”: “the analytic process is in effect a kind of reverse pedagogy, which aims at undoing what has been established by education.”<sup>8</sup> In the title of a recent book on the relationship of Freud to pedagogy, Freud is thus defined as “The Anti-Pedagogue.”<sup>9</sup> This one-sidedly negative interpretation of the relation of psychoanalysis to pedagogy fails to see that every true pedagogue is in effect an anti-pedagogue, not just because every pedagogy has historically emerged as a critique of pedagogy (Socrates: “There’s a chance, Meno, that we, you as well as me . . . have been inadequately educated, you by Gorgias, I by Prodicus”<sup>10</sup>), but because, in one way or another, every pedagogy stems from its confrontation with the impossibility of teaching (Socrates: “You see, Meno, that I am not teaching . . . anything, but all I do is question . . .”<sup>11</sup>). The reductive conception of “Freud: The Anti-Pedagogue” thus fails to see that there is no such thing as an anti-pedagogue: an anti-pedagogue is *the* pedagogue par excellence. Such a conception overlooks, indeed, and fails to reckon with, Freud’s own stupendous pedagogical performance, and its relevance to his declarations about pedagogy.

The trouble, both with the positivistic and with the negativistic misinterpretations of the psychoanalytical critique of pedagogy, is that they refer exclusively to Lacan’s or Freud’s explicit *statements* about pedagogy, and thus fail to see the illocutionary force, the didactic function of the *utterance* as opposed to the mere content of the statement. They fail to see, in other words, the pedagogical situation—the pedagogical dynamic in which statements function not as simple truths but as performative speech-acts. Invariably, all existing psychoanalytically-inspired theories of pedagogy fail to address the question of the pedagogical speech-act of Freud himself, or of Lacan himself: what can be learnt about pedagogy not just from their theories (which only fragmentarily and indirectly deal with the issue of education) but from their way of *teaching* it, from their own practice as teachers, from their own pedagogical performance.

Lacan refers explicitly to what he calls the psychoanalyst’s “mission of

7. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

8. Catherine Millot, interview in *l’Âne, le magazine freudien*, N° 1, April–May 1981, p. 19.

9. Catherine Millot, *Freud Anti-Pedagogue* (Paris: Bibliothèque d’Ornicar?, 1979).

10. Plato, *Meno*, 96 d, op. cit., p. 28 (translation modified).

11. *Ibid.*, 82 e, p. 15.

teaching" (E 241, N 34 TM<sup>12</sup>), and speaks of his own teaching—the bi-monthly seminar he gave for forty years—as a vocation, “a function . . . to which I have truly devoted my entire life” (S-XI, 7, N 1)<sup>13</sup>. Unlike Lacan, Freud addresses the issue of teaching more indirectly, rather by refusing to associate his person with it:

But there is one topic which I cannot pass over so easily—*not, however, because I understand particularly much about it* or have contributed very much to it. Quite the contrary: *I have scarcely concerned myself with it at all*. I must mention it because it is so exceedingly important, so rich in hopes for the future, perhaps the most important of all the activities of analysis. What I am thinking of is the application of psychoanalysis to education. [Standard, XXII, 146]

This statement thus promotes pedagogy to the rank of “perhaps the most important of all the activities of analysis” only on the basis of Freud’s denial of his own personal involvement with it. However, this very statement, this very denial is itself engaged in a dramatic pedagogical performance; it itself is part of an imaginary “lecture,” significantly written in the form of an academic public address and of a dialogue with students—a pedagogic dialogue imaginarily conducted by a Freud who, in reality terminally ill and having undergone an operation for mouth-cancer, is no longer capable of speech:

*My Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* were delivered . . . in a lecture room of the Vienna Psychiatric Clinic before an audience gathered from all the Faculties of the University. . . .

These new lectures, unlike the former ones, have never been delivered. My age had in the meantime absolved me from the obligation of giving expression to my membership in the University (which was in any case a peripheral one) by delivering lectures; and a surgical operation had made speaking in public impossible for me. If, therefore, I once more take my place in the lecture room during the remarks that follow, it is only by an artifice of the imagination; it may help me not to forget to bear the reader in mind as I

12. The abbreviation “TM”—“translation modified”—will signal my alterations of the official English translation of the work in question.

13. The abbreviation S-XI (followed by page number) refers to Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre XI, Les Quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1973). The following abbreviation “N” (followed by page number) refers to the corresponding English edition: *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1978).

As for the rest of Lacan’s Seminars which have appeared in book form, the following abbreviations will be used:

S-I (followed by page number), for: J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre I: Les Ecrits techniques de Freud* (Paris: Seuil, 1975);

S-II (followed by page number), for: J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre II: le Moi dans la théorie de Freud et dans la technique de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1978);

S-XX (followed by page number), for: J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre XX: Encore* (Paris: Seuil, 1975).

All quoted passages from these (as yet untranslated) Seminars are here in my translation.

enter more deeply into my subject. . . . Like their predecessors, [these lectures] are addressed to the multitude of educated people to whom we may perhaps attribute a benevolent, even though cautious, interest in the characteristics and discoveries of the young science. This time once again it has been my chief aim to make no sacrifice to an appearance of being simple, complete or rounded-off, not to disguise problems and not to deny the existence of gaps and uncertainties. [Standard, XXII, 5–6]

No other such coincidence of fiction and reality, biography and theory, could better dramatize Freud's absolutely fundamental pedagogic gesture. What better image could there be for the pedagogue in spite of himself, the pedagogue in spite of everything—the dying teacher whose imminent death, like that of Socrates, only confirms that he is a born teacher—than this pathetic figure, this living allegory of the speechless speaker, of the teacher's teaching out of—through—the very radical impossibility of teaching?

Pedagogy in psychoanalysis is thus not just a theme: it is a rhetoric. It is not just a statement: it is an utterance. It is not just a meaning: it is action; an action which itself may very well, at times, belie the stated meaning, the didactic *thesis*, the theoretical assertion. It is essential to become aware of this complexity of the relationship of pedagogy and psychoanalysis, in order to begin to think out what the psychoanalytic teaching about teaching might well be.

Discussing "The Teaching of Psychoanalysis in Universities," Freud writes: "it will be enough if [the student] learns something *about* psychoanalysis and something *from* it" (Standard, XVII, 173). To learn "something *from* psychoanalysis" is a very different thing than to learn "something *about* it:" it means that psychoanalysis is not a simple *object* of the teaching, but its *subject*. In his essay, "Psychoanalysis and its Teaching," Lacan underlines the same ambiguity, the same dynamic complexity, indicating that the true object of psychoanalysis, the object of his teaching, can only be that mode of learning which institutes psychoanalysis itself as subject—as the purveyor of the act of teaching. "How can what psychoanalysis teaches us be taught?," he asks (E 439).

As myself both a student of psychoanalysis and a teacher, I would here like to suggest that the lesson to be learnt about pedagogy from psychoanalysis is less that of "the *application* of psychoanalysis to pedagogy" than that of the *implication* of psychoanalysis in pedagogy and of pedagogy in psychoanalysis. Attentive, thus, both to the pedagogical speech-act of Freud and to the teaching-practice of Lacan, I would like to address the question of teaching as itself a psychoanalytic question. Reckoning not just with the pedagogical thematics *in* psychoanalysis, but with the pedagogical rhetoric *of* psychoanalysis, not just with what psychoanalysis says *about* teachers but with psychoanalysis *itself as teacher*, I will attempt to analyze the ways in which—modifying the conception of what *learning* is and of what *teaching*

is—psychoanalysis has shifted pedagogy by radically displacing our very modes of intelligibility.

### ANALYTICAL APPRENTICESHIP

Freud conceives of the process of a psychoanalytic therapy as a learning process—an apprenticeship whose epistemological validity far exceeds the contingent singularity of the therapeutic situation:

Psychoanalysis sets out to explain . . . uncanny disorders; it engages in careful and laborious investigations . . . until at length it can speak thus to the ego:

“ . . . A part of the activity of your own mind has been withdrawn from your knowledge and from the command of your will . . . you are using one part of your force to fight the other part . . . A great deal more must constantly be going on in your mind than can be known to your consciousness. Come, *let yourself be taught* . . . ! What is in your mind does not coincide with what you are conscious of; whether something is going on in your mind and whether you hear of it, are two different things. In the ordinary way, I will admit, the intelligence which reaches your consciousness is enough for your needs, and you may cherish the illusion that you learn of all the more important things. But in some cases, as in that of an instinctual conflict . . . your intelligence service breaks down . . . In every case, the news that reaches your consciousness is incomplete and often not to be relied on. . . . Turn your eyes inward, . . . *learn first to know yourself!* . . .

It is thus that *psychoanalysis has sought to educate the ego*. [Standard, XVII, 142–143]

Psychoanalysis is thus a pedagogical experience: as a process which gives access to new knowledge hitherto denied to consciousness, it affords what might be called a lesson in cognition (and in miscognition), an epistemological instruction.

Psychoanalysis institutes, in this way, a unique and radically original mode of learning: original not just in its procedures, but in the fact that it gives access to information unavailable through any other mode of learning—unprecedented information, hitherto *unlearnable*. “We learnt”, writes Freud, “a quantity of things which could not have been learnt except through analysis” (Standard, XXII, 147).

This new mode of investigation and of learning has, however, a very different temporality than the conventional linear—cumulative and progressive—temporality of learning, as it has traditionally been conceived by pedagogical theory and practice. Proceeding not through linear progression, but through breakthroughs, leaps, discontinuities, regressions, and deferred action, the analytic learning-process puts indeed in question the traditional pedagogical belief in intellectual perfectibility, the progressistic view of learning as a simple one-way road from ignorance to knowledge.

It is in effect the very concept of both ignorance and knowledge—the



understanding of what “to know” and “not to know” may really mean—that psychoanalysis has modified, renewed. And it is precisely the originality of this renewal which is central to Lacan’s thought, to Lacan’s specific way of understanding the cultural, pedagogical and epistemological revolution implied by the discovery of the unconscious.

### KNOWLEDGE

Western pedagogy can be said to culminate in Hegel’s philosophical didacticism: the Hegelian concept of “absolute knowledge”—which for Hegel defines at once the potential aim and the actual end of dialectics, of philosophy—is in effect what pedagogy has always aimed at as its ideal: the exhaustion—through methodical investigation—of all there is to know; the absolute completion—termination—of apprenticeship. Complete and totally appropriated knowledge will become—in all senses of the word—a *mastery*. “In the Hegelian perspective,” writes Lacan, “the completed discourse” is “an instrument of power, the scepter and the property of those who know” (S-II, 91). “What is at stake in absolute knowledge is the fact that discourse closes back upon itself, that it is entirely in agreement with itself.” (S-II, 91).

But the unconscious, in Lacan’s conception, is precisely the discovery that human discourse can by definition never be entirely in agreement with itself, entirely identical to its knowledge of itself, since, as the vehicle of unconscious knowledge, it is constitutively the material locus of a signifying difference from itself.

What, indeed, is the unconscious, if not a kind of *unmeant knowledge* which escapes intentionality and meaning, a knowledge which is spoken by the language of the subject (spoken, for instance, by his “slips” or by his dreams), but which the subject cannot recognize, assume as *his*, appropriate; a speaking knowledge which is nonetheless denied to the speaker’s knowledge? In Lacan’s own terms, the unconscious is “knowledge which can’t tolerate one’s knowing that one knows” (Seminar, Feb. 19, 1974; unpublished). “Analysis appears on the scene to announce that there is *knowledge which does not know itself*, knowledge which is supported by the signifier as such” (S-XX, 88). “It is from a place which differs from any capture by a subject that a knowledge is surrendered, since that knowledge offers itself only to the subject’s slips—to his misprision” (*Scilicet* I, 38)<sup>14</sup>. “The discovery of the unconscious . . . is that the implications of meaning infinitely exceed the signs manipulated by the individual” (S-II, 150). “As far as signs are concerned, man is always mobilizing many more of them than he knows” (S-II, 150).

14. Abbreviated for Lacan’s texts published in *Scilicet: Tu peux savoir ce qu’en pense l’école freudienne de Paris* (Paris: Seuil). The roman numeral stands for the issue number (followed by page number). Number I appeared in 1968.

If this is so, there can constitutively be no such thing as absolute knowledge: absolute knowledge is knowledge that has exhausted its own articulation; but articulated knowledge is by definition what cannot exhaust its own self-knowledge. For knowledge to be spoken, linguistically articulated, it would constitutively have to be supported by the ignorance carried by language, the ignorance of the *excess of signs* that of necessity its language—its articulation—“mobilizes”. Thus, human knowledge is, by definition, that which is *untotalizable*, that which rules out any possibility of totalizing what it knows or of eradicating its own ignorance.

The epistemological principle of the irreducibility of ignorance which stems from the unconscious, receives an unexpected confirmation from modern science, to which Lacan is equally attentive in his attempt to give the theory of the unconscious its contemporary scientific measure. The scientific a-totality of knowledge is acknowledged by modern mathematics, in set theory (Cantor: “the set of all sets in a universe does not constitute a set”); in contemporary physics, it is the crux of what is known as “the uncertainty principle” of Heisenberg:

This is what the Heisenberg principle amounts to. When it is possible to locate, to define precisely one of the points of the system, it is impossible to formulate the others. When the place of electrons is discussed . . . it is no longer possible to know anything about . . . their speed. And inversely . . . [S-II, 281]

From the striking and instructive coincidence between the revolutionary findings of psychoanalysis and the new theoretical orientation of modern physics, Lacan derives the following epistemological insight—the following pathbreaking pedagogical principle:

Until further notice, we can say that *the elements do not answer in the place where they are interrogated*. Or more exactly, as soon as they are interrogated somewhere, it is impossible to grasp them in their totality. [S-II, 281]

## IGNORANCE

Ignorance is thus no longer simply *opposed* to knowledge: it is itself a radical condition, an integral part of the very *structure* of knowledge. But what does ignorance consist of, in this new epistemological and pedagogical conception?

If ignorance is to be equated with the a-totality of the unconscious, it can be said to be a kind of forgetting—of forgetfulness: while learning is obviously, among other things, remembering and memorizing (“all learning is recollection,” says Socrates), ignorance is linked to what is *not remembered*, what will not be memorized. But what will not be memorized is tied up with repression, with the imperative to forget—the imperative to exclude from consciousness, to not admit to knowledge. Ignorance, in other words, is not a passive state of

absence—a simple lack of information: it is an active dynamic of negation, an active refusal of information. Freud writes:

It is a long superseded idea . . . that the patient suffers from a sort of ignorance, and that if one removes this ignorance by giving him information (about the causal connection of his illness with his life, about his experiences in childhood, and so on) he is bound to recover. The pathological factor is not his ignorance in itself, but the root of this ignorance in his *inner resistances*; it was they who first called this ignorance into being, and they still maintain it now. The task of the treatment lies in combating these resistances. [Standard, XI, 225]

Teaching, like analysis, has to deal not so much with *lack* of knowledge as with *resistances* to knowledge. Ignorance, suggests Lacan, is a “passion.” Inasmuch as traditional pedagogy postulated a desire for knowledge, an analytically informed pedagogy has to reckon with “the passion for ignorance” (S-XX, 110). Ignorance, in other words is nothing other than a *desire to ignore*: its nature is less cognitive than performative; as in the case of Sophocles’ nuanced representation of the ignorance of Oedipus, it is not a simple lack of information but the incapacity—or the refusal—to acknowledge *one’s own implication* in the information.

The new pedagogical lesson of psychoanalysis is not subsumed, however, by the revelation of the dynamic nature—and of the irreducibility—of ignorance. The truly revolutionary insight—the truly revolutionary *pedagogy* discovered by Freud—consists in showing the ways in which, however irreducible, *ignorance itself can teach us something*—become itself *instructive*. This is, indeed, the crucial lesson that Lacan has learnt from Freud:

It is necessary, says Freud, to interpret the phenomenon of doubt as an integral part of the message. [S-II, 155]

The forgetting of the dream is . . . itself part of the dream. [S-II, 154]

The message is not forgotten in just any manner. . . . A censorship is an intention. Freud’s argumentation properly reverses the burden of the proof—“In these elements that you cite in objection to me, the memory lapses and the various degradations of the dream, I continue to see a meaning, and even an additional meaning. When the phenomenon of forgetting intervenes, it interests me all the more . . . *These negative phenomena, I add them to the interpretation of the meaning, I recognize that they too have the function of a message.* Freud discovers this dimension . . . What interests Freud . . . [is] *the message as an interrupted discourse, and which insists.* [S-II, 153]

The pedagogical question crucial to Lacan’s own teaching will thus be: *Where does it resist?* Where does a text (or a signifier in a patient’s conduct) precisely make no sense, that is, *resist interpretation?* Where does what I see—and what I read—resist my understanding? Where is the *ignorance*—the resistance to knowledge—located? And what can I thus *learn* from the locus of

that ignorance? How can I interpret *out of* the dynamic ignorance I analytically encounter, both in others and in myself? How can I turn ignorance into an instrument of teaching?

. . . Teaching—says Lacan—is something rather problematic. . . . As an American poet has pointed out, no one has ever seen a professor who has fallen short of the task because of ignorance . . .

One always knows enough in order to occupy the minutes during which one exposes oneself in the position of the one who knows. . . .

This makes me think that there is no true teaching other than the teaching which succeeds in provoking in those who listen an insistence—this desire to know which can only emerge when they themselves have *taken the measure of ignorance as such*—of ignorance inasmuch as it is, as such, fertile—in the one who teaches as well. [S-II, 242]

#### THE USE OF THAT WHICH CANNOT BE EXCHANGED

Teaching, thus, is not the transmission of ready-made knowledge, it is rather the creation of a new *condition* of knowledge—the creation of an original learning-disposition. “What I teach you”, says Lacan, “does nothing other than express the *condition* thanks to which what Freud says is possible” (S-II, 368). The lesson, then, does not “teach” Freud: it teaches the “condition” which make it *possible to learn* Freud—the condition which makes possible Freud’s teaching. What is this condition?

In analysis, what sets in motion the psychoanalytical apprenticeship is the peculiar pedagogical structure of the analytic situation. The analyst speaks to the analyst, whom he endows with the authority of the one who possesses knowledge—knowledge of what is precisely lacking in the analyst’s own knowledge. The analyst, however, knows nothing of the sort. His only competence, insists Lacan, lies in “what I would call *textual knowledge*, so as to oppose it to the referential notion which only masks it” (*Scilicet* I, 21). Textual knowledge—the very stuff the literature teacher is supposed to deal in—is knowledge of the functioning of language, of symbolic structures, of the signifier, knowledge at once derived from—and directed towards—interpretation.

But such knowledge cannot be acquired (or possessed) once and for all: each case, each text, has its own specific, singular symbolic functioning, and requires thus a different—an original—interpretation. The analysts, says Lacan, are “those who share this knowledge only at the price, on the condition of their *not being able to exchange it*” (*Scilicet* I, 59). Analytic (textual) knowledge cannot be *exchanged*, it has to be *used*—and used in each case differently, according to the singularity of the case, according to the specificity of the text. Textual (or analytic) knowledge is, in other words, that peculiarly

specific knowledge which, unlike any commodity, is subsumed by its *use* value, having no exchange value whatsoever<sup>15</sup>. Analysis has thus no use for ready-made interpretations, for knowledge given in advance. Lacan insists on “the insistence with which Freud recommends to us to approach each new case as if we had never learnt anything from his first interpretations” (*Scilicet*, I, 20). “What the analyst must know,” concludes Lacan, “is how to ignore what he knows.”

#### DIALOGIC LEARNING, OR THE ANALYTICAL STRUCTURE OF INSIGHT

Each case is thus, for the analyst as well as for the patient, a new apprenticeship. “If it’s true that our knowledge comes to the rescue of the patient’s ignorance, it is not less true that, for our part, we, too, are plunged in ignorance” (S-I, 78). While the analysand is obviously ignorant of his own unconscious, the analyst is doubly ignorant: pedagogically ignorant of his suspended (given) knowledge; actually ignorant of the very knowledge the analysand presumes him to possess of his own (the analysand’s) unconscious: knowledge of the very knowledge he—the patient—lacks. In what way does knowledge, then, emerge in and from the analytic situation?

Through the analytic dialogue the analyst, indeed, has first to learn where to situate the ignorance: where his own textual knowledge is *resisted*. It is, however, out of this resistance, out of the patient’s active ignorance, out of the patient’s speech which says much more than it itself knows, that the analyst will come to *learn* the *patient’s own* unconscious *knowledge*, that knowledge which is inaccessible to itself because it cannot tolerate knowing that it knows; and it is the signifiers of this constitutively a-reflexive knowledge coming from the patient that the analyst *returns* to the patient from his different vantage point, from his non-reflexive, asymmetrical position as an Other. Contrary to the traditional pedagogical dynamic, in which the teacher’s question is addressed to an answer from the other—from the student—which is totally reflexive, and expected, “the true Other” says Lacan, “is the Other who gives the answer one does not expect” (S-II, 288). Coming from the Other, knowledge is, by definition, that which comes as a surprise, that which is constitutively the return of a difference:

*Teiresias*: . . . You are the land’s pollution.

*Oedipus*: How shamelessly you started up this taunt! How do you think you will escape?

15. As soon as analytic knowledge is exchanged, it ceases to be knowledge and becomes opinion, prejudice, presumption: “the sum of prejudices that every knowledge contains, and that each of us transports . . . Knowledge is always, somewhere, only one’s belief that one knows” (S-II, 56).

*Teiresias*: . . . I have escaped; the truth is what I cherish and that's my strength.

*Oedipus*: And *who has taught you truth*? Not your profession surely!

*Teiresias*: *You have taught me*, for you have made me speak against my will.

*Oedipus*: Speak what? Tell me again that I may *learn* it better.

*Teiresias*: Did you not understand before or would you provoke me into speaking?

*Oedipus*: *I did not grasp it, not so to call it known*. Say it again.

*Teiresias*: I say you are the murderer of the king whose murderer you seek.<sup>16</sup>

As *Teiresias*—so as to be able to articulate the truth—must have been “*taught*” not by “his profession” but *by Oedipus*, so the analyst precisely must be *taught* by the analysand's unconscious. It is by structurally occupying the position of the analysand's unconscious, and by thus making himself a *student of the patient's knowledge*, that the analyst becomes the patient's teacher—makes the patient learn what would otherwise remain forever inaccessible to him.

For teaching to be realized, for knowledge to be learnt, the position of alterity is therefore indispensable: knowledge is what is already there, but always in the Other. Knowledge, in other words, is not a *substance* but a structural dynamic: it is not *contained* by any individual but comes about out of the mutual apprenticeship between two partially unconscious speeches which both say more than they know. Dialogue is thus the radical condition of learning and of knowledge, the analytically constitutive condition through which ignorance becomes structurally informative; knowledge is essentially, irreducibly dialogic. “No knowledge,” writes Lacan, “can be supported or transported by one alone” (*Scilicet* I, 59).

Like the analyst, the teacher, in Lacan's eyes, cannot in turn be, alone, a *master* of the knowledge which he teaches. Lacan transposes the radicality of analytic dialogue—as a newly understood structure of insight—into the pedagogical situation. This is not simply to say that he encourages “exchange” and calls for students' interventions—as many other teachers do. Much more profoundly and radically, he attempts to *learn from the students his own knowledge*. It is the following original pedagogical appeal that he can thus address to the audience of his seminar:

It seems to me I should quite naturally be the point of convergence of the questions that may occur to you.

Let everybody tell me, in his own way, *his idea of what I am driving at*. How, for him, is opened up—or closed—or how already he resists, the question as I pose it . . . (S-II, 242)

16. Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, translated by David Grene, in *Sophocles I*, (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1954), pp. 25–6.

## THE SUBJECT PRESUMED TO KNOW

This pedagogical approach, which makes no claim to total knowledge, which does not even claim to be in possession of its own knowledge, is, of course, quite different from the usual pedagogical pose of mastery, different from the image of the self-sufficient, self-possessed proprietor of knowledge, in which pedagogy has traditionally featured the authoritative figure of the teacher. This figure of infallible human authority implicitly likened to a God, that is, both modeled on and guaranteed by divine *omniscience*, is based on an illusion: the illusion of a consciousness transparent to itself. "It is the case of the unconscious," writes Lacan, "that it abolishes the postulate of the subject presumed to know" (*Scilicet* I, 46).

Abolishing a postulate, however, doesn't mean abolishing an illusion: while psychoanalysis uncovers the mirage inherent in the function of the subject presumed to know, it also shows the prestige and the affective charge of that mirage to be constitutively irreducible, to be indeed most crucial to, determinant of, the emotional dynamic of all discursive human interactions, of all human relationships founded on sustained interlocution. The psychoanalytical account of the functioning of this dynamic is the most directly palpable, the most explicit lesson psychoanalysis has taught us about teaching.

In a brief and peculiarly introspective essay called "Some Reflections on Schoolboy Psychology," the already aging Freud nostalgically probes into his own "schoolboy psychology," the affect of which even time and intellectual achievements have not entirely extinguished. "As little as ten years ago," writes Freud, "you may have had moments at which you suddenly felt quite young again":

As you walked through the streets of Vienna—already a grey-beard and weighed down by all the cares of family life—you might come unexpectedly on some well-preserved, elderly gentleman, and would greet him humbly almost, because you had recognized him as one of your former schoolmasters. But afterwards, you would stop and reflect: 'Was that really he? or only someone deceptively like him? How youthful he looks! And how old you yourself have grown! . . . *Can it be possible that the men who used to stand for us as types of adulthood were so little older than we were?*' [Standard, XIII, 241]

Commenting on "my emotion at meeting my old schoolmaster," Freud goes on to give an analytical account of the emotional dynamic of the pedagogical situation:

It is hard to decide whether what affected us more . . . was our concern with the sciences that we were taught or with . . . our teachers . . . In many of us *the path to the sciences led only through our teachers*. . . .

We courted them and turned our backs on them, we imagined sympathies and antipathies which probably had no existence . . .

. . . *psychoanalysis has taught us* that the individual's emotional attitudes to other people . . . are . . . established at an unexpectedly early age . . . The people to whom [the child] is in this way fixed are his parents . . . His later acquaintances are . . . obliged to *take over a kind of emotional heritage*; they encounter sympathies and antipathies to the production of which they themselves have contributed little . . .

These men [the teachers] became our *substitute fathers*. That was why, even though they were still quite young, *they struck us as so mature and so unattainably adult*. We transferred to them *the respect and expectations attaching to the omniscient father of our childhood*, and then we began to treat them as we treated our own fathers at home. We confronted them with the *ambivalence* that we had acquired in our own families and with its help we struggled with them as we had been in the habit of struggling with our fathers . . . [Standard, XIII, 242–44]

This phenomenon of the compulsive unconscious reproduction of an archaic emotional pattern, which Freud called “transference” and which he saw both as the energetic spring and as the interpretive key to the psychoanalytic situation, is further thought out by Lacan as what accounts for the functioning of authority in general: as essential, thus, not just to any pedagogic situation but to the problematics of knowledge as such. “As soon as there is somewhere a subject presumed to know, there is transference,” writes Lacan (S-XI, 210).

Since “transference is the acting out of the reality of the unconscious” (S-XI, 150, 240, N 174, 267), teaching is not a purely cognitive, informative experience, it is also an emotional, erotical experience. “I deemed it necessary,” insists Lacan, “to support the idea of transference, as indistinguishable from love, with the formula of the subject presumed to know. I cannot fail to underline the new resonance with which this notion of knowledge is endowed. The person in whom I presume knowledge to exist, thereby acquires my love” (S-XX, 64). “The question of love is thus linked to the question of knowledge” (S-XX, 84). “Transference is love . . . I insist: it is love directed toward, addressed to, knowledge” (*Scilicet* V, 16).

“Of this subject presumed to know, who,” asks Lacan, “can believe himself to be entirely invested?—That is not the question. The question, first and foremost, for each subject, is how to situate *the place from which he himself addresses* the subject presumed to know?” (S-XX, 211) Insofar as knowledge is itself *a structure of address*, cognition is always both motivated and obscured by love; theory, both guided and misguided by an implicit transferential structure.

#### ANALYTIC PEDAGOGY, OR DIDACTIC PSYCHOANALYSIS: THE INTERMINABLE TASK

In human relationships, sympathies and antipathies usually provoke—and call for—a similar emotional response in the person they are addressed to.



Transference on “the subject presumed to know”—the analyst or the teacher—may provoke a counter-transference on the latter’s part. The analytic or the pedagogical situation may thus degenerate into an imaginary mirror-game of love and hate, where each of the participants would unconsciously enact past conflicts and emotions, unwarranted by the current situation and disruptive with respect to the real issues, unsettling the topical stakes of analysis or education.

In order to avoid this typical degeneration, Freud conceived of the necessity of a preliminary psychoanalytic training of “the subjects presumed to know,” a practical didactic training through their own analysis which, giving them insight into their own transferential structure, would later help them understand the students’ or the patients’ transferential mechanisms and, more importantly, keep under control their own—avoid being entrapped in counter-transference. “The only appropriate preparation for the profession of educator,” suggests Freud, “is a thorough psycho-analytic training . . . The analysis of teachers and educators seems to be a more efficacious prophylactic measure than the analysis of children themselves” (Standard, XXII, 150).

While this preliminary training (which has come to be known as “didactic psychoanalysis”) is, however, only a recommendation on Freud’s part as far as teachers are concerned, it is an absolute requirement and precondition for the habilitation—and qualification—of the psychoanalyst. In his last and therefore, in a sense, testamentary essay, “Analysis Terminable and Interminable,” Freud writes:

Among the factors which influence the prospects of analytic treatment and add to its difficulties in the same manner as the resistances, must be reckoned not only the nature of the patient’s ego but the individuality of the analyst.

It cannot be disputed that *analysts . . . have not invariably come up to the standard of psychical normality to which they wish to educate their patients*. Opponents of analysis often point to this fact with scorn and use it as an argument to show the uselessness of analytic exertions. We might reject this criticism as making unjustifiable demands. *Analysts are people who have learnt to practice a particular art; alongside of this, they may be allowed to be human beings like anyone else*. After all, nobody maintains that a physician is incapable of treating internal diseases if his own internal organs are not sound; on the contrary, it may be argued that there are certain advantages in a man who is himself threatened with tuberculosis specializing in the treatment of persons suffering from that disease. . . .

It is reasonable, [however,] . . . to expect of an analyst, as part of his qualifications, a considerable degree of mental normality and correctness. In addition, he must possess some kind of superiority, so that in certain analytic situations he can *act as a model for his patient* and in others *as a teacher*. And finally, we must not forget that the analytic relationship is based on a love of truth—that is, on a recognition of reality—and that it precludes any kind of sham or deceit. . . .

It almost looks as if analysis were the third of those ‘impossible’ professions . . .

*Where is the poor wretch to acquire the ideal qualifications which he will need in his profession? The answer is, in an analysis of himself, with which his preparation for his future activity begins. For practical reasons this analysis can only be short and incomplete. . . . It has accomplished its purpose if it gives the learner a firm conviction of the existence of the unconscious, if it enables him . . . to perceive in himself things which would otherwise be incredible to him, and if it shows him a first example of the technique . . . in analytic work. This alone would not suffice for his instruction; but we reckon on the stimuli he has received in his own analysis not ceasing when it ends and on the process of remodelling the ego continuing spontaneously in the analysed subject and making use of all subsequent experiences in this newly-acquired sense. This does in fact happen, and in so far as it happens, it makes the analysed subject qualified to be an analyst.* [Standard, XXIII, 247–49]

Nowhere else does Freud describe as keenly *the revolutionary radicality of the very nature of the teaching* to be (practically and theoretically) derived from the originality of the psychoanalytical experience. The analysand is qualified to be an analyst as of the point at which he understands his own analysis to be inherently unfinished, incomplete, as of the point, that is, at which he settles into his own didactic analysis—or his own analytical apprenticeship—as fundamentally interminable. It is, in other words, as of the moment the student recognizes that *learning has no term*, that he can himself become a teacher, assume the position of the teacher. But the position of the teacher is itself the position of *the one who learns*, of the one who *teaches* nothing other than *the way he learns*. The subject of teaching is interminably—a student; the subject of teaching is interminably—a learning. This is the most radical, perhaps the most far-reaching insight psychoanalysis can give us into pedagogy.

Freud pushes this original understanding of what pedagogy is to its logical limit. Speaking of the “defensive” tendency of psychoanalysts “to divert the implications and demands of analysis from themselves (probably by directing them on to other people)”—of the analysts’ tendency, that is, “to *withdraw from the critical and corrective influence of analysis*,” as well as of the temptation of power threatening them in the very exercise of their profession, Freud enjoins:

Every analyst should periodically—at intervals of five years or so—submit himself to analysis once more, without feeling ashamed of taking this step. This would mean, then, that not only the therapeutic analysis of patients<sup>17</sup> but *his own analysis would change from a terminable into an interminable task.* [Standard, XXIII, 249]

17. The therapeutic analysis of patients is “interminable” to the extent that repression can never be totally lifted, only displaced. Cf. Freud’s letter to Fliess, dated April 16, 1900: “E’s career as a patient has at last come to an end . . . His riddle is *almost* completely solved, his condition is excellent . . . At the moment a residue of his symptoms remains. I am beginning to understand that the apparently interminable nature of the treatment is something determined by law and is dependent on the transference.” Hence, Freud speaks of “the asymptotic termination of treatment.” (Standard, XXIII, 215) Freud’s italics.

Of all Freud's followers, Lacan alone has picked up on the radicality of Freud's pedagogical concern with didactic psychoanalysis, not just as a subsidiary technical, pragmatic question (how should analysts be trained?), but as a major theoretical concern, as a major pedagogical investigation crucial to the very innovation, to the very revolutionary core of psychoanalytic insight. The highly peculiar and surprising style of Lacan's own teaching-practice is, indeed, an answer to, a follow-up on, Freud's ultimate suggestion—in Lacan's words—"to make psychoanalysis and education (training) collapse into each other" (E 459).

This is the thrust of Lacan's original endeavor both as psychoanalyst and as teacher: "in the field of psychoanalysis," he writes, "what is necessary is the restoration of the identical status of didactic psychoanalysis and of the teaching of psychoanalysis, in their common scientific opening" (E 236).

As a result of this conception, Lacan considers not just the practical analyses which he—as analyst—directs, but his own public teaching, his own seminar—primarily directed towards the (psychoanalytical) training of analysts—as partaking of didactic psychoanalysis, as itself, thus, analytically didactic and didactically analytical, in a new and radical way.

"How can what psychoanalysis teaches us be taught?" (E 439)—Only by continuing, in one's own teaching, one's own interminable didactic analysis. Lacan has willingly transformed himself into the *analysand* of his Seminar<sup>18</sup> so as to teach, precisely, psychoanalysis *as* teaching, and teaching *as* psychoanalysis.

Psychoanalysis as teaching, and teaching as psychoanalysis, radically subvert the demarcation-line, the clear-cut opposition between the analyst and the analysand, between the teacher and the student (or the learner)—showing that what counts, in both cases, is precisely the transition, the struggle-filled *passage* from one position to the other. But the passage is itself interminable; it can never be crossed once and for all: "The psychoanalytic act has but to falter slightly, and it is the analyst who becomes the analysand" (*Scilicet* I, 47). Lacan denounces, thus, "the reactionary principle" of the professional belief in "the duality of the one who suffers and the one who cures," in "the opposition between the one who knows and the one who does not know. . . . The most corrupting of comforts is intellectual comfort, just as one's *worst* corruption is the belief that one is *better*" (E 403).

Lacan's well-known polemical and controversial stance—his *critique of psychoanalysis*—itself partakes, then, of his understanding of the pedagogical imperative of didactic psychoanalysis. Lacan's original endeavor is to submit *the whole discipline of psychoanalysis* to what Freud called "the critical and corrective influence of analysis" (Standard, XXIII, 249). Lacan, in other words,

18. The occasional master's pose—however mystifying to the audience—invariably exhibits itself as a parodic symptom of the analysand.

is the first to understand that the psychoanalytic discipline is an unprecedented one in that its *teaching* does not just reflect upon itself, but turns back upon itself so as to *subvert itself*, and truly *teaches* only insofar as it subverts itself. Psychoanalytic teaching is pedagogically unique in that it is inherently, interminably, self-critical. Lacan's amazing pedagogical performance thus sets forth the unparalleled example of a teaching whose fecundity is tied up, paradoxically enough, with the inexhaustibility—the interminability—of its *self-critical potential*.

From didactic analysis, Lacan derives, indeed, a whole new theoretical (didactic) mode of *self-subversive self-reflection*.

A question suddenly arises . . . : in the case of the knowledge yielded solely to the subject's mistake, what kind of subject could ever be in a position to know it in advance? (Scilicet I, 38)

Retain at least what this text, which I have tossed out in your direction, bears witness to: my enterprise does not go beyond the act in which it is caught, and, therefore, its only chance lies in its being mistaken. (Scilicet I, 41)

This lesson seems to be one that should not have been forgotten, had not psychoanalysis precisely taught us that it is, as such, forgettable. [E 232]

Always submitting analysis itself to the instruction of an unexpected analytic turn of the screw, to the surprise of an additional reflexive turn, of an additional self-subversive ironic twist, didactic analysis becomes for Lacan what might be called a *style*: a teaching style which has become at once a life-style and a writing-style: "the ironic style of calling into question the very foundations of the discipline" (E 238).

Any return to Freud founding a teaching worthy of the name will occur only on that pathway where truth . . . becomes manifest in the revolutions of culture. That pathway is the only training we can claim to transmit to those who follow us. It is called—a style. (E 458)

Didactic analysis is thus invested by Lacan not simply with the practical, pragmatic value, but with the theoretical significance—the allegorical instruction—of a paradigm: a paradigm, precisely, of the interminability, not just of teaching (learning) and of analyzing (being analyzed), but of the very act of thinking, theorizing: of teaching, analyzing, thinking, theorizing, in such a way as to make of psychoanalysis "what it has never ceased to be: an act that is yet to come" (Scilicet I, 9).

## TEACHING AS A LITERARY GENRE

Among so many other things, Lacan and Freud thus teach us teaching, teach us—in a radically new way—what it might mean to teach. Their lesson, and

their pedagogical performance, profoundly renew at once the meaning and the status of the very act of teaching.

If they are both such extraordinary teachers, it is—I would suggest—because they both are, above all, quite extraordinary learners. In Freud's case, I would argue, the extraordinary teaching stems from Freud's original—unique—position as a student; in Lacan's case, the extraordinary teaching stems from Lacan's original—unique—position as disciple.

"One might feel tempted," writes Freud, "to agree with the philosophers and the psychiatrists and like them, rule out the problem of dream-interpretation as a purely fanciful task. *But I have been taught better*" (Standard, IV, 100).

*By whom* has Freud been taught—taught better than by "the judgement of the prevalent science of today," better than by the established scholarly authorities of philosophy and psychiatry? Freud has been taught *by dreams* themselves: his own, and those of others; Freud has been taught by his own patients: "*My patients . . . told me their dreams and so taught me . . .*" (Standard, VI, 100–101).

Having thus been taught by dreams, as well as by his patients, that—contrary to the established scholarly opinion—dreams do have meaning, Freud is further taught by a literary text:

This discovery is confirmed by a legend that has come down to us from antiquity. . . .

While the poet . . . brings to light the guilt of Oedipus, he is at the same time compelling us to recognize our own inner minds . . .

Like Oedipus, we live in ignorance of these wishes. . . . and after their revelation, we may all of us well seek to close our eyes to the scenes of our childhood. [Standard, VI, 261–263]

"But I have been taught better." What is unique about Freud's position as a student—as a learner—is that he learns from, or puts in the position of his teacher, the least authoritative sources of information that can be imagined: that he knows how to derive a teaching, or a lesson, from the very unreliability—the very *non-authority*—of literature, of dreams, of patients. For the first time in the history of learning, Freud, in other words, has recourse—scientific recourse—to a knowledge which is not authoritative, which is not that of a master, a knowledge which does not know what it knows, and is thus *not in possession of itself*.

Such, precisely, is the very essence of literary knowledge. "I went to the poets," says Socrates; ". . . I took them some of the most elaborate passages in their own writings, and asked them what was the meaning of them—thinking that they would teach me something. Will you believe me? I am almost ashamed to confess the truth, but I must say that there is hardly a person present who would not have talked better about their poetry than they did

themselves. Then I knew that *not by wisdom do poets write poetry, but by a sort of genius or inspiration*; they are like diviners or soothsayers who also *say many fine things, but do not understand the meaning of them*. The poets appeared to me to be much in the same case."<sup>19</sup> From a philosophical perspective, knowledge is mastery—that which is in mastery of its own meaning. Unlike Hegelian philosophy, which *believes it knows all that there is to know*; unlike Socratic (or contemporary post-Nietzschean) philosophy, which *believes it knows it does not know*—literature, for its part, *knows it knows, but does not know the meaning of its knowledge*—does not know *what* it knows.

For the first time, then, Freud gives authority to the instruction—to the teaching—of a knowledge which does not know its own meaning, to a knowledge (that of dreams, of patients, of Greek tragedy) which we might define as literary: knowledge that is not in mastery of itself.

Of all Freud's students and disciples, Lacan alone has understood and emphasized the *radical* significance of Freud's indebtedness to literature: the role played by *literary knowledge* not just in the historical constitution of psychoanalysis, but in the very actuality of the psychoanalytic act, of the psychoanalytic (ongoing) *work* of learning and of teaching. Lacan alone has understood and pointed out the ways in which Freud's teaching—in all senses of the word—is not accidentally, but radically and fundamentally, a *literary* teaching. Speaking of "the training of the analysts of the future," Lacan thus writes:

One has only to turn the pages of his works for it to become abundantly clear that Freud regarded a study . . . of the resonances . . . of literature and of the significations involved in works of art as necessary to an understanding of the text of our experience. Indeed, Freud himself is a striking instance of his own belief: he derived his inspiration, his ways of thinking and his technical weapons, from just such a study. But he also regarded it as a necessary condition in any teaching of psychoanalysis. [E 435, N 144]

This [new] technique [of interpretation] would require for its teaching as well as for its learning a profound assimilation of the resources of a language, and especially of those that are concretely realized in its poetic texts. It is well known that Freud was in this position in relation to German literature, which, by virtue of an incomparable translation, can be said to include Shakespeare's plays. Every one of his works bears witness to this, and to the continual recourse he had to it, no less in his technique than in his discovery. [E 295, N 83]

The psychoanalytic experience has rediscovered in man the imperative of the Word as the law that has formed him in its image. It manipulates the poetic function of language to give to his desire its symbolic mediation. [E 322, N 106]

19. Plato, *Apology*, 22 a–c, in *Dialogues of Plato*, Jowett translation, edited by J. D. Kaplan (New York: Washington Square Press, Pocket Books, 1973), p. 12.

Freud had, eminently, this feel for meaning, which accounts for the fact that any of his works, *The Three Caskets*, for instance, gives the reader the impression that it is written by a soothsayer, that it is guided by that kind of meaning which is of the order of poetic inspiration. [S-II, 353]

It is in this sense, among others, that Lacan can be regarded as Freud's best student: Lacan is the sole Freudian who has sought to learn from Freud how to learn Freud: Lacan is "taught" by Freud in much the same way Freud is "taught" by dreams; Lacan reads Freud in much the same way Freud reads *Oedipus the King*, specifically seeking in the text its *literary knowledge*. From Freud as teacher, suggests Lacan, we should learn to derive that kind of *literary teaching* he himself derived in an unprecedented way from literary texts. Freud's text should thus itself be read as a poetic text:

. . . the notion of the death instinct involves a basic irony, since its meaning has to be sought in the conjunction of two contrary terms: instinct . . . being the law that governs . . . a cycle of behavior whose goal is the accomplishment of a vital function, and death appearing first of all as the destruction of life. . . .

This notion must be approached through its resonances in what I shall call *the poetics of the Freudian corpus*, the first way of access to the penetration of its meaning, and the essential dimension, from the origins of the work to the apogee marked in it by this notion, for an understanding of its dialectical repercussions. [E 316–17, N 101–02]

It is here, in conjunction with Lacan's way of relating to Freud's literary teaching and of learning from Freud's literary knowledge, that we touch upon the historical uniqueness of Lacan's position as disciple, and can thus attempt to understand the way in which this pedagogically unique discipleship accounts for Lacan's astounding originality as a teacher.

"As Plato pointed out long ago," says Lacan, "it is not at all necessary that the poet know what he is doing, in fact, it is preferable that he not know. That is what gives a primordial value to what he does. We can only bow our heads before it" (Seminar, April 9, 1974, unpublished). Although apparently Lacan seems to espouse Plato's position, his real pedagogical stance is, in more than one way, at the antipodes of that of Plato; and not just because he bows his head to poets, whereas Plato casts them out of the Republic. If Freud himself, indeed, bears witness, in his text, to some poetic—literary—knowledge, it is to the extent that, like the poets, he, too, cannot exhaust the meaning of his text—he too partakes of the poetic ignorance of his own knowledge. Unlike Plato who, from his position as an admiring disciple, reports Socrates' assertion of his ignorance without—it might be assumed—really believing in the *non-ironic truth* of that assertion ("For the hearers," says Socrates, "always imagine that I myself possess the wisdom I find wanting in others"<sup>20</sup>), Lacan can be said to be the first disciple in the whole history of pedagogy and of

20. Plato, *Apology*, 22 a–c, op. cit., p. 12.

culture who *does indeed believe in the ignorance of his teacher—of his master*. Paradoxically enough, this is why he can be said to be, precisely, Freud's best student: a student of Freud's own revolutionary way of learning, of Freud's own unique position as the unprecedented student of unauthorized, unmastered knowledge. "The truth of the subject," says Lacan, "even when he is the position of a master, is not in himself" (S-XI, 10).

[Freud's] texts, to which for the past . . . years I have devoted a two-hour seminar every Wednesday . . . without having covered a quarter of the total, . . . , have given me, and those who have attended my seminars, the surprise of genuine discoveries. These discoveries, which range from concepts that have remained unused to clinical details uncovered by our exploration, demonstrate *how far the field investigated by Freud extended beyond the avenues that he left us to tend*, and how little his observation, which sometimes gives an impression of exhaustiveness, was the slave of what he had to demonstrate. Who . . . has not been moved by this research in action, whether in 'The Interpretation of Dreams,' 'The Wolf Man,' or 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle?' [E 404, N 117, TM]

Commenting *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Lacan situates in Freud's text the discoverer's own transference structure—Freud's own unconscious structure of address:

What polarizes at that moment Freud's discourse, what organizes the whole of Freud's existence, is the conversation with Fliess. . . . It is in this dialogue that Freud's self-analysis is realized . . . This vast speech addressed to Fliess will later become the whole written work of Freud.

The conversation of Freud with Fliess, this fundamental discourse, which at that moment is unconscious, is the essential dynamic element [of *The Interpretation of Dreams*]. Why is it unconscious at that moment? Because its significance goes far beyond what both of them, as individuals, can consciously apprehend or understand of it at the moment. As individuals, they are nothing other, after all, than two little erudites, who are in the process of exchanging rather weird ideas.

The discovery of the unconscious, in the full dimension with which it is revealed at the very moment of its historical emergence, is that the scope, the implications of meaning go far beyond the signs manipulated by the individual. As far as signs are concerned, man is always mobilizing many more of them than he knows. [S-II, 150]

It is to the extent that Lacan precisely teaches us to read in Freud's text (in its textual excess) the signifiers of Freud's ignorance—his ignorance of his own knowledge—that Lacan can be considered Freud's best reader, as well as the most compelling teacher of the Freudian pedagogical imperative: the imperative to learn from and through the insight which does not know its own meaning, from and through the knowledge which is not entirely in mastery—in possession—of itself.

This unprecedented *literary* lesson, which Lacan derives from Freud's revolutionary way of learning and in the light of which he learns Freud, is



transformed, in Lacan's own work, into a deliberately literary style of teaching. While—as a subject of praise or controversy—the originality of Lacan's eminently literary, eminently “poetic” style has become a stylistic *cause célèbre* often commented upon, what has not been understood is the extent to which this style—this poetic theory or theoretical poetry—is *pedagogically* poetic: poetic in such a way as to raise, through every answer that it gives, the literary question of its non-mastery of itself. In pushing its own thought beyond the limit of its self-possession, beyond the limitations of its own capacity for mastery; in passing on understanding which does not fully understand what it understands; in *teaching*, thus, *with blindness*—with and through the very blindness of its literary knowledge, of insights not entirely transparent to themselves—Lacan's unprecedented theoretically *poetic pedagogy* always implicitly opens up onto the infinitely literary, infinitely *teaching* question: What is the “navel”<sup>21</sup> of my own theoretical dream of understanding? What is the specificity of my incomprehension? What is the riddle which I in effect here pose under the guise of knowledge?

“But what was it that Zarathustra once said to you? That poets lie too much? But Zarathustra too is a poet. Do you believe that in saying this he spoke the truth? Why do you believe that?”

The disciple answered, “I believe in Zarathustra.” But Zarathustra shook his head and smiled.<sup>22</sup>

Any return to Freud founding a teaching worthy of the name will occur only on that pathway where truth . . . becomes manifest in the revolutions of culture. That pathway is the only training we can claim to transmit to those who follow us. It is called—a style. [E 458]<sup>23</sup>

21. “There is,” writes Freud, “at least one spot in every dream at which it is unplumbable—a navel, as it were, that is its point of contact with the unknown” (Standard, IV, 111).

22. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (TM), in *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: the Viking Press, 1971), p. 239, “On Poets.”

23. The present essay is a chapter from my forthcoming book: *Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Culture: Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight*.

The news of Lacan's death (on September 9, 1981) reached me as I was writing the section here entitled “The Interminable Task.” The sadness caused by the cessation of a life as rich in insight and as generous in instruction, was thus accompanied by an ironic twist which itself felt like a typical Lacanian turn, one of the ironies of his teaching: teaching terminable and interminable . . . Few deaths, indeed, have been as deeply inscribed as a lesson in a teaching, as Lacan's, who always taught the implications of the Master's death. “Were I to go away,” he said, some time ago, “tell yourselves that it is in order to at last be truly Other.”

I have deliberately chosen not to change, and to pursue, the grammatical present tense which I was using to describe Lacan's teaching: since his life has ceased to be, his teaching is, indeed, all the more present, all the more alive, all the more interminably “what it has never ceased to be: an act that is yet to come.”