
L E G A C Y

The Truth of Psychoanalysis

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“Freud’s discovery puts truth into question, and there is no one who is not personally concerned by truth.”
(Jacques Lacan¹)

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WHAT IS psychoanalysis? Or, rather, what would psychoanalysis look like if one were to hold back everything that one is presumed to know about it—in other words, if one would decide to make as few concessions as possible to the already customary and somewhat worn out definitions of psychoanalysis as some kind of revolutionary theory-cum-therapy or therapy-cum-theory? Such a precaution is taken here not in order to point quite facetly the finger at common-sense vulgarizations of psychoanalysis. Indeed, the existence of such vulgarizations is perhaps the best proof that *there is* something in the place that our theoretical and not so theoretical fantasies have reserved to this nothing called “psychoanalysis.” All that is asked by our initial question is concentrated in this *there is*. However, to accept that the theoretical place of “psychoanalysis” is not completely empty does not automatically mean to agree with granting it a full and unquestionable existence. At the same time, this is not by any means the equivalent of stating, in the currently fashionable manner, that psychoanalysis has a “plurality-

ty” of definitions and consists of a “multitude” of practices, which cannot be held together by a single word.

To not agree with notions that would refer to psychoanalysis as a substantial reality has a completely different strategic function here. It means first and foremost to refresh the way we look at it and to install ourselves from the very beginning into the possibility that something uncanny or *Unheimlich* takes place *with* and *as* psychoanalysis, something that needs to be saved from a common sense or academic “there is” that conceals this haunting strangeness, just as the sea conceals its bottoms. And the metaphor should be taken seriously: we need to cross the apparently transparent layers of common sense, i.e. what is “closest” to us, staring at the non-perspective of more or less opaque densities formed by the agglomeration of such transparencies. It is precisely this lack of a clear perspective on what psychoanalysis was, and perhaps still is, that should become our uneasy starting point.

There is a certain tendency in today’s academia to look down on psychoanalysis as the affair of some legendary *enfants terribles* (“Freud,” “Lacan,” “Jung” and many others²), who at the end of the day were not able to fulfill the scientific requirements of the most recent psychotherapy and should be taken into consideration only as “historical curiosities” in an imaginary Museum of Sciences of the *Psyche*. To be sure, in such a place psychoanalysis would at least be in good company, joining philosophy (Aristotle, for instance—but it is quite probable that Nietzsche and some others would not be spared either) in the area reserved to psychological cultural waste. All in all, beyond its relevance for cultural history and sociology, the fate of psychoanalysis confronts us with the task of figuring out whether there is something to be saved or recovered from the psychoanalytic adventure, and what “saving” and “recovery” could mean when what is at stake is the living truth of a historical “truth formation,” if one may use this phrase.

Such a topic sets up a minimal program or protocol to follow in dealing with our initial question. Rather than a comprehensive or exhaustive historical research that tries to explain the origins of psychoanalysis and the various values this word designates (an undertaking that is completely unimaginable in the confines of a rather short paper), the train of thoughts proposed here seeks a way to access a question that was more or less neglected by scientific literature: the question of the fundamental truth of psychoanalysis or, rather, of what unveils itself through the emergence of psychoanalysis. (So far, it was only Martin Heidegger who tried to attack the question of the general truth of psychoanalysis, subsuming the Freudian theory to what he diagnosed as modern subjectivism.³ As is known, for Heidegger this was a strong enough reason for a brutal rejection of the psychoanalytic project as a whole, and this, indeed,

makes inevitable the return at some point to the issue of Heidegger's relationship to Freud, at least if one did not prefer to ignore this criticism made by a major thinker.)

The main assumption of the interrogation proposed here is that, beyond its usual characterizations as a therapeutic practice and/or theory, psychoanalysis reveals something fundamental about the constitution of our world, being of great value not only as a theory of the *psyche*, but also as *theoria tout court*, as something that opens up a general truth horizon. In my intention, this essay should prepare us for the perception of the world dimension that comes into play *with* and *as* psychoanalysis. *With* and *as*: the italics here are meant to be a little more than rhetoric. Indeed, they want to emphasize that psychoanalysis as such should be read as a world- or onto-historical event, in which Being (*Sein*) or the "is" is at stake. To be sure, the validity of such a quasi-Heideggerian theoretical proposition, which nevertheless refuses the Heideggerian rejection of psychoanalysis, is not something that could be demonstrated without a long and complicated analysis that would already rely on it as an assumption, legitimating a starting point through its results, so to speak. It goes without saying that such a work cannot be the aim of this essay, which means that the starting point here should remain somewhat "axiomatic." Hence the apparently tautological or circular statement: what takes place *with* the appearance of psychoanalysis on the stage of world history⁴ takes place or materializes itself *as* the truth of psychoanalysis. This is meant to say that the essence (*Wesen*)⁵ of psychoanalysis establishes itself in a truth or a potentiality of the world, which would have remained thoroughly unnoticed without the psychoanalytical event. This is why I said that the truth of psychoanalysis is a truth of the world (or an onto-logical truth). The complementary character of these two phenomenalizations⁶ would already suggest that, to paraphrase Heidegger's words, the essence of psychoanalysis is more than psychoanalytical. And it is the truth of this essence that we should start to decode, without forgetting—not even for a split second—that we have to do this *today*, when the distant call of the Inaugural that can still be heard in the writings of Lacan, for instance, seems to have left the once abundant gardens of psychoanalysis.

The Inaugural—unusual as it may seem, this adjective forced to be read as a noun is suggested as a term for the beginning-character of all beginnings, the opening up of a horizon or of an openness. In our particular case, and we should pay even more attention to this than Freud did, it designates the rise of a *type of knowledge*⁷ (to characterize it from the point of view of epistemology) or of a "dealing with truth" that can hardly be fitted in the scientific landscape of its time. In this sense, it would be probably more correct to characterize the Freudian "Copernican revolution" as the rise of a radically new meaning of the verb "to

know.” This because the fact that Freud tried to articulate his invention in the language of “science” pure and simple attests only to the spirit of his time: a non-scientific form of medical therapy would be dismissed at the beginning of the all too scientific 20th century as simple sorcery. And we know that, with all the precautions taken by Freud, many voices claimed at the time that he was nothing but a charlatan... Fortunately enough, then as nowadays, scientists did not excel at reading texts, otherwise they would have been surprised to learn that what Freud sold them as psychoanalysis had, in its essence, nothing to do with *their* science-based criticism of the Freudian *theoria*,⁸ a criticism which falls completely outside the Freudian space of truth.

BUT WHAT did this radical novelty or difference of Freudian knowledge consist of? It is precisely this novelty that Lacan refers to as the “Freudian truth.” It is the same Lacan who brought us closer to the real size of the “question of Freud” or, if you will, of the question of “Freud,” of something uncanny happening under this proper name. In a sense, one could even say that it is *only* the Lacanian *écriture* that brings us back to what was lost, or if not precisely lost, then at least tamed, in Freud’s efforts of legitimizing his discovery. The strangeness of this writing should actually be read as a more accurate *revelation* (also in the Lacanian sense of the term⁹) of “Freud” as an event, insofar as this event is not something reducible only to Freud’s texts. As a matter of fact, a search for the truth of psychoanalysis, or for the truth of how the world is revealed by psychoanalysis, needs to supplement the reading of Freud’s oeuvre with a reflection upon the psychoanalytic *practice* or upon the *analytic situation*, upon that which takes place in the office of the analyst. This is the most elementary way in which the “Freudian truth” can be “verified” or even perceived as “truth.”

Among the various attempts to deal with this truth, i.e. to develop the possibilities of psychoanalysis, Jacques Lacan is one of the few authors who, paradoxically enough, revolutionized the language of psychoanalysis in the name of a fidelity to the Freudian doctrine higher than that displayed by those who want to correct Freud’s theories on the basis of an allegedly more advanced psychoanalytic knowledge.¹⁰ Not that Lacan would support the idea that the Freudian doctrine is a closed truth that should never change. On the contrary, he was quite aware that not only the theoretical discourse, but also the practice of the treatment is, in fact, a historical entity subject to various transformations. His remarks about how the vague—or, for that matter, precise—knowledge of the patient about psychoanalysis can influence the treatment itself are quite revealing in this sense.¹¹ Although the fact that Lacan grafted onto the language of psychoanalysis the conceptuality of linguistics is usually seen as the

most notable feature of his innovation, we should not forget that it was the same Lacan who tried to understand how what he called the “Freudian truth” functions at the level of the treatment itself. In order to prove this, it is enough to read the following passage from “The Freudian Thing”:

But I am asking where the peace that ensues in recognizing an unconscious tendency comes from if the latter is not truer than what restrained it in the conflict. For some time now this peace has, moreover, been quickly proving illusory, for psychoanalysts, not content to recognize as unconscious the defenses to be attributed to the ego, have increasingly identified the defense mechanisms—displacement from the object, turning back against the subject, regression of form—with the very dynamic that Freud analyzed in the tendency, which thus seems to persist in the defenses with no more than a change of sign. Haven't people gone too far when they submit that the drive itself may be made conscious by the defense so that the subject won't recognize himself in it?

In order to try to explain these mysteries in a coherent discourse, I am, in spite of myself, using words that reestablish in that discourse the very duality that sustains them. But what I deplore is not that one cannot see the forest of the theory for the trees of the technique employed, but rather that it would take so little to believe that one is in the Bondy Forest, precisely because of the following notion, which is hiding behind each tree—namely, that there must be some trees that are truer than others, or, if you prefer, than not all trees are bandits.¹²

These lines express quite clearly the general equation in which Lacan places himself. One of the elements of this equation is called “truth,” the *healing* truth of the Freudian doctrine. Nevertheless, even this single fragment from “The Freudian Thing” could show us the quite complex and complicated status of truth in Lacan’s writings. Since the fundamental question of my inquiry is the truth unveiled by the advent of psychoanalysis, it is necessary to see if and how this truth is reflected in Lacan’s reworking of the Freudian heritage. A possible starting point for such a meditation is Lacan’s “The Direction of the Treatment and the Principles of Its Power.” This is not to say that “The Direction of the Treatment” would be the only text where Lacan goes back to the “Freudian truth.” “The Direction of the Treatment” is exemplary only because it repeats some of the insights that were already expressed in “The Freudian Thing” and, in addition to this, formulates a truly philosophical claim extracted from Freud.

Lacan’s “The Direction of the Treatment” is nothing but an attempt at producing the truth of the treatment as the truth of psychoanalysis and that of Freud-as-an-event as truth of the world: a triple equivalence, then, in which eventually the truth unveiled by psychoanalysis has the value of a general truth about

human life. In other words, beyond the question “how to (treat):?”—which is *the* technical question—, Lacan’s text also deals with a question of “what is the treatment?” that cannot be neglected. Not that the questions related to the direction of the treatment would be secondary, but they are always attacked from the point of view of a certain truth that guides Lacan’s insights. This truth might be the “Freudian truth” *per se*, at least one could say that there is always a “return to Freud” that commands Lacan’s interventions in this text. However, it seems that the “Freudian truth” is a double one by its nature. It encompasses not only the “really existing” Freudian doctrine, but also its *potentialities* derived from the truth of the treatment, in an attempt to produce, through the “combination” of these two elements, the truth of psychoanalysis itself. As Lacan suggests in one of the last paragraphs of his text, the latter is also a truth about life, about the “meaning of life,”¹³ and, as such, about the world. Nevertheless, it is not my aim to produce a complete reading of this Lacanian text. In fact, pointing out the phenomenological value of some of its moments does not even constitute a *reading* of this writing. This is to say that the hypothesis announced here must remain a hypothesis and nothing more. What really matters is in fact what comes to light from the point of view of this hypothesis. These precautions taken, let us proceed with the development of the main question.

“The Direction of the Treatment” is usually seen as Lacan’s great polemical writing, directed against his fellow psychoanalysts. Written in 1958, the text mentions and discusses with a certain critical vehemence most of the then important contributions to the field. As a result, the whole text resembles a settling of accounts, where Lacan refutes, with great virtuosity, the theoretical and practical “errors” of his colleagues, while trying to prove the validity of his own teachings. But the fact that “The Direction of the Treatment” is so obviously a *refutation* of psychoanalytic commonplaces should have made its readers aware of the presence of some sort of “truth” in the name of which Lacan is able to articulate his positions. This “truth” is certainly not the same as Lacan’s quite elaborate notion of the same, but is not completely different either, inasmuch as it reflects at least one of the Lacanian characterizations of truth, namely, truth as something that makes possible a *consensus* or agreement within an agora.¹⁴ Of course, the agora here is first of all the scientific community of psychoanalysts, although Lacan makes it clear that his text is addressed also to the lay reader, who is even used here as a witness to Lacan’s message to the analysts. In fact, the passage in which Lacan sets up retroactively, in the middle of his text, the stage of his own amphitheatre is worth quoting: “Lest the lay reader be misled, let me say that I wish in no way to disparage a work to which Virgil’s epithet *improbis* can rightly be applied. My only purpose is to warn analysts of the decline their technique suffers when they misrecognize the true place in which its effects are produced.”¹⁵

This fragment is the only place in this writing where Lacan explicitly mentions an addressee of the text different from the scientific community of analysts, which is so obviously the public of his essay. Indeed, with this wink at the lay reader, Lacan lets us see the whole set of relationships involved here: he is on the stage with his fellow psychoanalysts—part actors, part public—while we, the lay readers, the “real” public should watch the drama (tragedy?) that Lacan simultaneously directs and participates in as an actor, the main actor, of course. Why does Lacan set up this stage? And why does he let us know towards the end of the third act that we, the lay readers, are also called to watch him, the main actor and the director of the drama? Although the strange effects produced by this setting could be further analyzed, insofar as the situation imagined by Lacan says something about his notion of truth (one must lie in order to speak the truth),¹⁶ it is important to stress that Lacan actually *believed* that his text can be read by a lay public. Why would a “specialist”¹⁷ with such an idiosyncratic language appeal to the understanding of the general public, if not because he believes that his message exceeds in fact his professional circle? Is this not the most evident sign that Lacan thought that his text expresses a more *general* truth than that of a specialist field? Perhaps this has to do with the fact that truth, as Lacan puts it, concerns everybody. The matter is to know what truth Lacan refers to when he makes this claim. The epigraph quoted at the beginning of this text seems to suggest that Lacan refers to truth pure and simple. But what is truth pure and simple? And what is truth pure and simple for *Lacan*, whose discussion of truth shows us that this notion is not by any means a self-explanatory one?

Here we should find a way of briefly reconstructing the sinuous path of truth in Lacan’s writings.

In his *Lacan—The Absolute Master*, Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen dedicates two chapters to the question of truth in Lacan’s writings (“How Can We Speak the Truth?” and “How To Do Nothing With Words?”).¹⁸ In the first of these he arrives to the question of truth after discussing the goal of analysis in Freud and Lacan. According to Jacobsen, the goal of analysis in Freud is to bring the repressed wish to consciousness, while in Lacan is “to recognize the desire of the subject.”¹⁹ These two goals, in fact two different translations of the same goal, bring us to the question of how the repressed wish or desire is expressed. Jacobsen notes that this question raises another one: “Could the desire in question have been expressed *before* its repression?”²⁰ Lacan further complicates this question by asking if we should be content to speak solely about repression. He has two answers to this question: yes and no.

Yes, because “repression is equivalent to not (being capable of) speaking the truth.”²¹ But what does speaking mean for Lacan? “The man who, in the act of speaking, breaks the bread of truth with his counterpart, shares the lie.”²²

This “sharing of the lie,” Jacobsen explains, is nothing but the repression and forgetting of desire, the breaking of the “sword of speech” in order to

pacify the relationships with the other. This is the truth of the symbolic exchange as such and it is presupposed by every society, while it is also the truth about the necessary concealment/repression of desire.²³ This is the first fundamental axis that guides Lacan's meditation on truth.

The second axis is drawn by the negative answer to the question about repression. According to this answer, "repression is still something other than lying, and forgetting is not simply a mistake."²⁴ Since the truth of desire is precisely what cuts speech off, repression is not a simple omission or a lie, or it is so only if we immediately add that this *lie* is in fact the *truth*. As Jacobsen puts it, "repression represses and forgets *nothing*."²⁵ But if repression represses nothing, this means that there is actually no veil behind which desire could hide.

It is not hard to see that the two axes outlined here lead us to a quite paradoxical interpretation of truth, in which repression is in fact the manifestation of desire, but a manifestation that ultimately reveals nothing or, rather, *the* nothing of desire. Lacan follows the definition of desire established by Kojève: "desire is the nothing (the negation) of everything that is."²⁶ This is why, Jacobsen explains, Lacan concludes that repression, which is also a negation, constitutes a paradoxical *presentation* of desire.²⁷ This structure of the truth of desire and the references to Heidegger made by Lacan will allow Jacobsen to say that the "Freudian truth' is apparently nothing but the *alētheia* of Martin Heidegger."²⁸ For the sake of concision, I will quote here a fragment in which Jacobsen summarizes the most important features of *alētheia*: "For Heidegger, the 'revealing' (apophantic) essence of truth is to 'hide'—what? Nothing, no being (for such a being, once unveiled, would in turn veil, and so on). The *alētheia* . . . inevitably carries a portion of occultation and forgetting (*lēthē*): nothing can unveil itself in the opening of the presence except on condition of occulting—not this or that, but its own essential *disoccultation*."²⁹

Examining the structure of the Heideggerian truth summarized here by Jacobsen, one can easily notice the resemblance between this structure and the play of repression and desire in Lacan's discussion of truth. Nevertheless, according to Jacobsen there are two essential differences between the Heideggerian and the Lacanian definition of truth. The first is that Lacanian truth is always the truth of the subject, while the Heideggerian one is the truth of Being. Consequently, the second difference is that the Being unveiled by Lacanian truth is always the "nucleus of *our* being."³⁰ "The subject [the Lacanian one], in sum, heir to all the features of Heidegger's Being, is . . . considered to speak himself in every statement—but also to disappear in every statement, since the subject speaks himself as nothing and as pure *desire* of self. Truth/certainty, classically defined since Descartes by the statement's subject being identical to the subject of the enunciation, now becomes—once it has passed through the burning fire of *alētheia*—the non-self-identity of the 'same' subject."³¹

It is interesting how Jacobsen, who has such an extensive knowledge of Heidegger and of the history of philosophy in general, rushes to establish a distinction between Lacan and Heidegger on the basis of Heidegger's rejection of modern subjectivism. Indeed, if we examine closely the passage quoted above we can discover that, although the notion of Lacanian subject is quite incompatible with Being, this is not the case with what Heidegger calls *Dasein*. Gérard Granel, one of the unjustly forgotten great names of contemporary French philosophy, notices in his "Heidegger et Lacan" that in spite of the differences between them, a careful analysis of the two authors could discover some parallels between the Heideggerian and the Lacanian definition of "man" (*Dasein* for Heidegger, *sujet* for Lacan).³² The non-self-identity of the 'same' subject mentioned by Jacobsen rhymes perfectly with the ek-static character of the *Dasein*, the element that links them being the finitude of (the human) being.³³

IT IS astonishing to learn from "The Direction of the Treatment" that this finitude is in fact the domain in which one should start searching for the truth of psychoanalysis. "Who, as fearlessly as this clinician [Freud], so firmly rooted in the everydayness of human suffering, has questioned life as to its meaning—not to say that it has none, which is a convenient way of washing one's hands of the matter, but to say that it has only one, that in which desire is borne by death."³⁴

This fragment is the place of an enigma. Nevertheless, it gives us the key to the main question of this essay: Where to search for the truth of psychoanalysis? It is against death, against the horizon of death that life builds up its meaning: the only one. Is it possible, then, that psychoanalysis is nothing but a *theoria* of finitude? Is this what constitutes the non-transitive hard kernel of psychoanalysis, the truth it reveals? Is psychoanalysis another way to get to this age-old truth? This would not yet guarantee a world-historical uniqueness... It is rather the way in which this finitude comes into play in psychoanalysis that makes the difference. In Lacan's interpretation of Freud, it is the truth of the dramatic lack of truth that commands the development of the psychoanalytical field. But are we able at all to navigate amongst the cliffs of this truth, a truth that can never rest in a calm identity with itself, a truth that is the truth about truth for the *subject*, insofar as the real subject (and it is important to stress that this is also the real subject of any *theoria*) is always caught in a process of questioning from the perspective of which "truth" is nothing but a moment of rest or an interruption? The vertigo of this question is what psychoanalysis forces us into. Examined from this abyss, our efforts to "deal with" this "discipline," either by simply rejecting it as outdated or simply "using" it as a fashionable tool of theoretical inquiry, are still too far from perceiving the disruptive effect of finitude the psychoanalytical event stands for.



Notes

1. Jacques Lacan, "The Freudian Thing," in *Ecrits: A Selection* (New York–London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002), 111.
2. The fact that Jung's name usually appears next to Freud's is an exact measure of the common-sense vulgarizations I have just mentioned. It is surprising to see that sometimes even the academic environment cannot protect itself from the intrusion of this quasi-intellectualist common sense.
3. See Martin Heidegger, *Zollikon Seminars: Protocols—Conversations—Letters* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2001).
4. One should perhaps take seriously the fact that an analyst and theoretician such as Jacques Lacan could think of his discoveries as being of world-historical importance. See, for instance, Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).
5. This term should be taken in its Heideggerian sense.
6. See Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, *Lacan—The Absolute Master* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1991), 131.
7. Louis Althusser has a similar claim in his "Freud and Lacan," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 133–150.
8. It is only from an orthodox Heideggerian position that Freud could be assimilated with the general matrix of modern sciences.
9. See Borch-Jacobsen, 115.
10. Jacques Lacan, "The Direction of the Treatment and the Principles of Its Power," in *Ecrits: A Selection*, 215–216.
11. *Ibid.*, 216.
12. Lacan, "The Freudian Thing," 111.
13. Lacan, "The Direction of the Treatment," 265.
14. Borch-Jacobsen, 127.
15. Lacan, "The Direction of the Treatment," 238.
16. Borch-Jacobsen, 103.
17. It is not at all obvious if Lacan should be considered only as a "specialist" or not.
18. See Borch-Jacobsen, 97–168.
19. *Ibid.*, 97.
20. *Ibid.*, 102.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Lacan, quoted in Borch-Jacobsen, 102–103.
23. *Ibid.*, 103.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*, 104.
29. *Ibid.*, 105.

30. Ibid., 108.
31. Ibid.
32. Gérard Granel, "Lacan et Heidegger, réflexions à partir des *Zollikoner Seminare*," in *Lacan avec les philosophes* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1990).
33. Ibid.
34. Lacan, "The Direction of the Treatment," 265.

Abstract

The Truth of Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis has been for almost a century not only a specific form of psychotherapy, but also an extremely fruitful theoretical area. Has this significant influence of psychoanalysis brought us closer to what assures the effectiveness of psychoanalytic knowledge? What type of knowledge is this (scientific, extra-scientific)? Is it possible to determine the epistemological type of psychoanalysis? The guiding hypothesis of this paper is that psychoanalysis reveals an aspect of the world itself. Focusing on Lacan's interpretation of truth, this paper suggests that the larger family in which psychoanalytic knowledge can find its place is the Heideggerian knowledge of finitude.

Keywords

psychoanalysis, truth, Lacan, Freud, Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, finitude