

IS IT POSSIBLE TO ANALYSE ANALYTIC WRITINGS? THE MUCH-DISCUSSED CASE OF THE BRAIN EATER¹

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I will start by saying that I am not a Lacanian, despite my early Lacanian training many decades ago. I would rather call myself a 'Lacanologist', or a 'Lacanophile'. I do not work within the Lacanian system, but I work around it - and not only around it. When you work *within* a system of thought, you never really question the pillars of a master's system; instead, working around it means constantly confronting yourself with what a master says without any prejudices and making no concessions. In the same way as a bee goes around the flower to suck up the nectar, without falling inside.

There is a statement by Lacan that I find crucial, something he said in 1979, shortly before his death:

As I now come to think, psychoanalysis is intransmissible. It is very annoying. It is very annoying that each psychoanalyst is forced – since he must be forced to do so – to reinvent psychoanalysis.

... each psychoanalyst reinvents, according to what he has succeeded in extracting from having been an analysand for a time, the way in which psychoanalysis may endure.²

These statements are very surprising when one considers that throughout his life Lacan's only concern was to try to transmit psychoanalysis to others. Lacan published his major work, the *Écrits*, very late in life, at the age of 65, because he had always taught. But by the end of his journey he came to the conclusion that psychoanalysis is intransmissible! That everyone has to reinvent it for themselves! In short, he concludes that it is not enough to follow in Freud's footsteps, but that everyone has to become a Freud in their own small way, that psychoanalysis always starts from the beginning. This, he says, is the condition for psychoanalysis to endure, that is, to survive: that it always starts again from the beginning.

I always try to start from scratch too, not only in my clinical practice, because each new case is unique. I also start from scratch when I read more or less seminal analytical texts. How do we then read an analytical text?

What is usually done in psychoanalytic schools is a reading in a general sense of the classics of psychoanalysis – which are the works of Freud, Winnicott, M. Klein, Bion, Lacan and a few others. That is, the essential concepts are drawn from these authors. But

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² 9^e Congrès de l'École Freudienne de Paris sur « La transmission » *Lettres de l'École*, 1979, n° 25, vol. II, 219-220.

does understanding a work mean understanding its concepts? If that were the case, a good Handbook –and there are plenty – would be sufficient to understand psycho-analytic doctrine and all its variants. But we know that this is not the case. This is true not only of analytical texts, but also of texts from many other fields. Especially philosophy. Because I also happen to practise philosophy; it is my weekend pursuit.

In philosophy too, does authentically understanding a philosopher mean synthesising their conclusions? Or does it mean retracing the tortuous path by which they reached them? Or perhaps authentically understanding a philosopher means somehow to ‘analyse’ them, in the same way as we analyse a patient’s discourse: in the sense that we need to understand the hidden, implicit meaning of their texts, unknown to the authors themselves. Every text – except for exact scientific disciplines, but even there we might see things otherwise... – always has a double bottom, like the suitcases of drug traffickers.

Emile Benveniste in linguistics and John Austin in philosophy introduced some crucial distinctions, whereby on the one hand we have ‘statements’, words that have a certain manifest meaning, and on the other something that Benveniste calls ‘*énonciation*’, utterance, and Austin ‘performative force’. That is, understanding *who* makes a certain statement, and *when, where, to whom* and *why* it is expressed. The analyst always attributes a performative force to what the patient says or does: to speak is to *act*. But it is something similar for written works. Lacan said so himself, and I used this sentence of his as an epigraph at the beginning of the book I am presenting: ‘Commenting on a text is like conducting an analysis’. A text is always a text to analyse. Even a psychoanalytic text?

With my booklet, I wanted to offer an example: that not only do psychoanalytic texts need to be psycho-analysed, but that perhaps the real way to understand them is to psychoanalyse them. Psychoanalysis to the nth degree. To understand a text, in general, is to read into it what it does not say, which is actually the part of the text that we secretly find convincing. Freud said that the true sense of theatrical works such as *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet* consists in the Oedipal plots he described. Today we can reduce the importance of the Oedipal myth and concede that Freud somewhat twisted these texts that revolve around patricide, but there is no doubt that Freud encourages us to read *another discourse* in these works, as in all works.

But what is then the sense of so many of Freud’s works?

In particular, why is Freud obsessed with the theme of patricide throughout his works? Why does it haunt him until his death, up to the visionary and almost delirious text on Moses? Today analysts are only concerned with whether a mother was good enough or basically not good enough, but Freud always asked: ‘How does each subject cope with her or his patricide?’ Of course we can interpret this fixation with patricide in several ways. We can reconstruct Freud’s biography and look at the relationship with his real father, but that would be an analysis of the most trivial kind. We can read patricide as a metaphor for the decline of patriarchal society, a decline that in Freud’s time had only just begun and which we now see unfolding in all its magnitude. The razzle-dazzle of queer culture is perhaps one of the radical forms that patricide has assumed. Or we can also see patricide as a variation on the theme of the death of God, as Nietzsche had already articulated it, i.e. ‘what is the subject in a secularised society from which God has been removed?’ But many other readings are possible.

Now, analysts, to truly understand the discourses of their analysands, mostly rely on mistakes, lapses, dreams, quirky remarks, in short, on what in their discourses seems not to have a meaning or fail in their meaning. I think that in order to analyse a psychoanalytic text we need to start from these failures in the text, when the author makes mistakes, mixes things up, bungles, misquotes... Even when I use written texts in supervision, the first thing I ask is to reflect on the lapses, mistakes or ungrammaticalities in the clinical text. And indeed, that is exactly how I started to analyse Lacan's discourse in this book: I began with his errors, which after all other commentators had already seen before me.

The Lacanian texts I focused on concern a clinical case described by Ernst Kris, a patient Lacan never met. The latter, a young scholar, complains of a compulsion to plagiarise texts written by his peers. Kris does not tell us the name of his patient, which is why I provided him with one, Professor Brain, since one of the recurring motifs of this analysis was precisely his fondness for the dish of fresh brains. Kris reports and comments on this case to illustrate his analytic technique, that of analysing the patient's defences, which he believed should precede the analysis of unconscious contents. In short, Kris's is almost a propaganda text for techniques considered novel in analysis, all related to Ego Psychology, of which Kris was one of the main proponents.

Lacan returns to this case – or rather, to Kris's text on this case – on several occasions over the years, apparently to say very different things. I do not want to anticipate here the various themes that I take up in the book taking as a starting point Lacan's apparent fascination with this case, which of course was never his. One theme is an in-depth critique of the Ego Psychology technique of the time, a critique the sense of which derives – as I try to show through a historical reconstruction – from the fact that at the time Lacan himself was being probed by the IPA for his own technique. The main concern at the time was his practice of variable-time sessions, which were usually too short according to the canon. Indeed, Lacan was excluded from the IPA because of these very technical irregularities. Moreover, Lacan uses the case of Professor Brain as an opportunity to deal with issues such as plagiarism, acting out during analysis, the oral drive, mental anorexia, etc. Above all, Lacan seems to want to make Professor Brain an ally against his analyst. But why all this?

I will anticipate the conclusion I came to after reading Lacan's various texts on Prof. Brain: Lacan used this case to express a largely imaginary battle of his own, the one he was fighting to establish himself as Freud's true heir. It was the 1950s, and this war was raging because Freud had died only a few years earlier and some analysts, first of all his daughter Anna, had presented themselves as his natural heirs. But I do not think that the crux of my work is ultimately to highlight the historical conflict over a symbolic inheritance of Freud's legacy. I think the core of my work is: 'What of psychoanalysis can be transmitted?' By analysing a subject who, when transmitting his own thought, had to consider it not as his own but as someone else's, Lacan was actually dealing with the general theme of the transmission of texts, of thoughts, knowledge and know-how.... Not only transmission to students, but to everyone, through books or seminars. How can we speak or write about psychoanalysis both for our peers and ordinary people?

There are three aspects to transmission: (1) Is it possible to somehow transmit what I would call *analytical talent*? (2) Is it possible to think, and therefore say and write,

something original in psychoanalysis and, ultimately, in any field? And (3) in general, can we say that we have understood somebody else's text?

Whether what I would call talent could be transmitted through books, speech and supervision is a very old question. Plato already confronted it in the dialogue *Meno*. The theme is whether it is possible to teach, to transmit, *aretē*. In English *aretē* is translated as virtue. But for us virtue has a Christian connotation, like the theological virtues or the heavenly virtues. By contrast, the Greek *aretē* was something far more generic, even if it had the specific sense of military courage, like the Latin *virtus*. Today we could translate *aretē* as *talent*. In the Platonic dialogue, Meno asks Socrates whether he thinks talent can be taught, whether it is acquired through practice or whether it is a natural gift. Today we all think that we can only acquire the ability to be an analyst if we undergo an analysis ourselves. But, beyond that, is the ability to be an analyst acquired through teaching, through practice or is it a natural gift?

To be quite frank: we are all convinced that some colleagues have talent while others lack it. And, it must be said, we do not necessarily value colleagues from our own school or with a similar training to ours more than the others. But I always ask myself: what is it that makes us consider a colleague as talented or untalented, even if we have not been their supervisor or undergone analysis with them? Often our high or low regard for colleagues depends on imaginary factors that in fact have nothing to do with their practice, of which in most cases we know very little about.

In these writings Lacan tries to show that Kris is ultimately untalented. That is why Kris thinks his patient is not a real plagiarist but only an imaginary one. According to Lacan, Kris's strategy is based on the following: proving to Brain that he has never actually plagiarised anyone, quite the opposite... he has been plagiarised by his colleague. Now, Lacan does not believe in plagiarism because, according to him, every work, even the most original and creative, is an act of plagiarism... This is why for Lacan telling to Brain that he's not a plagiarist, as Kris did, does not have sense. Each written work is created using language, and a language is never our invention, it is something that comes to us from the Other, with an uppercase A. If we think of ourselves, of our intimacy, we think of ourselves through the language of the Other. We derive all our ideas from the Other, that is, from the great collective discourse in which we are caught and sometimes even crushed by. In what sense, then, can we say that someone has plagiarised someone else? Lacan basically thinks that Brain is indeed a plagiarist, contrary to what Kris thinks. Rather, his problem is that, unlike everyone else, he refuses to accept that he is a plagiarist.

In other words, what makes this copying each other, which is the basis of social exchange – even between psychoanalysts – result in something creative at one point? I would argue that we can indeed say something new, something unique, that is not a mere repetition of what has already been said, not when we invent new words or new expressions, but simply when, copying... we insert variations, personal differences. The very foundation of writing is copying.

Allow me a personal evocation. I started using a typewriter – there were no personal computers at the time – around puberty, when I was more or less 12 years old. I used to write my own things with a pen: diaries, reflections, intimate thoughts, stories... But when I switched to typing, the first thing that came to my mind was to copy texts that I had already read and enjoyed. I loved to copy entire pages of books that had already been

published. Then, little by little, I began to intersperse the texts with some notes of my own, things that came from me and made a difference, but always within texts that were copied almost word for word. *Almost*, that's the point... the copies became less and less identical... And, after a while, I was able to write texts that were entirely my creation.

I view this strange initiation of mine into machine writing as a metaphor for a much more general evolution of our original relationship to language and hence to writing. In order to think thoughts, our own thoughts, first of all we need to repeat those of others. Knowing how to think something new is a process of decanting, to borrow a term from oenology. This is why I believe that good schools of psychoanalysis are useful, indispensable: they teach us how to copy effectively. But then we also need to stop going to school. To stop being 'eternal students', an expression often used in Italy to define those who are unable to start a working life. Schools are fine if they teach well. Because only if you forget what you have learnt well can you learn from experience. The better a school teaches, the more important it is to unlearn.

In several points of the book I show how Lacan has not entirely understood Kris's text. Perhaps because his knowledge of English was not too proficient at the time. Or is it because he engages in parapraxes, i.e. he sees things that Kris never wrote, or fails to see? Things Kris did write. But, some will ask, why should your interpretation, Benvenuto, be better than Lacan's? Can we say that any interpretation is just like any other? Of course not, we know full well that not all interpretations of a poem, for instance, are equivalent. Some are trite or wacky, others are acute and reveal unexpected dimensions of the text. But we can never manage to prove why a certain reading is profound, acute, perspicuous, while another is superficial, dull, deforming. It is like in psychoanalysis: which interpretation, among the various put forward or favoured by the various schools, is the good one? Each of us has an intuition, I would say a visceral intuition, that our own interpretation is the right one, but how do we convey this intuition to others?

By interpreting a text, I mean 'reading a text', and we take for granted that reading it means understanding it. More generally, then, what does *to understand a text* mean? And what does it mean when we say to ourselves 'I finally understand that patient now!', or 'That patient finally understands!'? So, the problem is not only that of transmitting a talent, but I would say the meaning of what we read. And also transmit the ability to find the sense of what we read.

I don't know if this is the case with you, but I have to say that the older I become, the more I feel that what I think and say and write is not understood. And this is not because I write in a complex or long-winded style; on the contrary, I am often told that my writing is clear and vivid. The point is that each reading is subjective. Very few people, I believe, understand what I write, even if they understand it in their own way, as is only right. When one of my books is presented or reviewed, I am left quite speechless: most of the time I receive the impression that I have been misunderstood. Not only that, but everyone misunderstands me in their own way! I have to say that some people misunderstand my writing, and other texts, in original, idiosyncratic, basically brilliant ways. And they also misunderstand me when their presentations or reviews are extremely positive. Sometimes the harshest critics are those who have actually grasped your thinking much better than those who celebrate it.

This is something that happens among the greats too, of course. For example, much of surrealism was a brilliant misunderstanding of Freud. According to many acute Freud commentators, he even misunderstood himself. Perhaps many analyses of brilliant texts are brilliant in themselves because they show how great authors misunderstood themselves. After all, is that not what we do every day in our practice? We try to make subjects understand how they have understood themselves.

After all, with the possible exception of mathematics, or certain exact sciences which are mathematised anyway, almost all so-called intellectual debate is based on misunderstandings. That is, each of us has the impression that we have been misunderstood by our opponent, which explains why our opponent opposes us... In short, each of us understands the other in our own way. This happens, of course, even with the great masters. I am aware that I personally read authors like Freud, Lacan, Wittgenstein or Derrida in a radically different way from the way so many others read them. This could lead to solipsistic conclusions. In fact, all communication and transmission presuppose solipsism, in the sense that all attempt to communicate with other is a challenge to solipsism.

But I hope that here, among us, we can understand each other a little. I assume that everyone will interpret what I say in their own way, just as I would interpret what each of you says in my own way. And yet, somehow, something will coalesce – or at least one hopes so. This interplay of misunderstandings may even lead some or many of us to feel or to believe that we feel that we are ‘on the same wavelength’.

Perhaps what is important in intellectual communication is not understanding each other as such; what is really important is, I would say, to create a ‘living room’... Create a place, a rhythm, that makes us feel that we are in the same living room. The important thing is being-together, wanting to talk to each other, exchange ideas... I believe that today analysts who are not regimented within rigid institutions come together, coalesce, not on the basis of a common, single system of thought, but on the basis of this need to socialise, ultimately to be friends.

But why are we condemned to understand different things about each other’s discourse? I would say because everyone’s unconscious is different from everyone else’s. Just like everyone’s cultural background, everyone’s experiences, everyone’s tastes are different...