BEYOND OEDIPUS: 
THE SPECIMEN STORY 
OF PSYCHOANALYSIS

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I

What is a Key-Narrative?

“We are forever telling stories about ourselves,” writes Roy Schafer, in an essay¹ that most suggestively defines the crux of the relation—and of the differentiation—between psychoanalysis and narration: between the daily practice (need) of telling stories and the narrative experience that is at stake in a practical psychoanalysis:

We are forever telling stories about ourselves. In telling these stories to others, we may . . . be said to perform straightforward narrative actions. In saying that we also tell them to ourselves, however, we are enclosing one story within another. . . . On this view, the self is a telling. . . .

Additionally, we are forever telling stories about others . . . we narrate others just as we narrate ourselves. . . . Consequently, telling “others” about “ourselves” is doubly narrative.

Often the stories we tell about ourselves are life historical or autobiographical; we locate them in the past. For example, we might say, “Until I was fifteen, I was proud of my father” or “I had a totally miserable childhood.” These histories are present tellings. The same may be said of the histories we attribute to others. We change many aspects of these histories of self and others as we change, for better or worse, the implied or stated questions to which they are the answers. Personal development may be characterized as change in the questions it is urgent or essential to answer. As a project in personal development, personal analysis changes the leading questions that one addresses to the tale of one’s life and the lives of important others.²

Freud changed, indeed, our understanding of the leading questions underlying his patients’ stories. The constitution of psychoanalysis, however, was motivated not just in the patients’ need to

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tell their stories, nor even merely in Freud’s way of changing the essential questions that those narrative complaints addressed, but in Freud’s unprecedented transformation of narration into theory. In transforming, thus, not just the questions of the story but the very status of the narrative, in investing the idiosyncrasies of narrative with the generalizing power of a theoretical validity, Freud had a way of telling stories—of telling stories about others and of telling others stories about himself—which made history.

My dear Wilhelm,

My self-analysis is the most important thing I have in hand, and promises to be of the greatest value to me, when it is finished. . . . If the analysis goes on as I expect, I shall write it all out systematically and lay the results before you. So far I have found nothing completely new, but all the complication to which I am used. . . . Only one idea of general value has occurred to me. I have found love of the mother and jealousy of the father in my own case too, and now believe it to be a general phenomenon of early childhood. . . . If that is the case, the gripping power of Oedipus Rex . . . becomes intelligible. The Greek myth seizes on a compulsion which everyone recognizes because he has felt traces of it in himself. Every member of the audience was once a budding Oedipus in phantasy, and this dream-fulfilment played out in reality causes everyone to recoil in horror, with the full measure of repression which separates his infantile from his present state.3

“Only one idea of general value has occurred to me. I have found love of the mother and jealousy of the father in my own case too.” From the Letters to Fliess to The Interpretation of Dreams, what Freud is instituting is a radically new way of writing one’s autobiography, by transforming personal narration into a path-breaking theoretical discovery. In the constitution of the theory, however, the discovery that emerges out of the narration is itself referred back to a story which confirms it: the literary drama of the destiny of Oedipus, which, in becoming thus a reference narrative—the specimen story of psychoanalysis—, situates the validating moment at which the psychoanalytic story-telling turns and returns back upon itself, in the unprecedented, Freudian narrative-discursive space in which narration becomes theory.

This discovery is confirmed by a legend which has come down to us from classical antiquity: a legend whose profound and universal power to move can only be understood if the hypothesis I have put forward in regard to the psychology of children has an equally universal validity. What I have in mind is the legend of King Oedipus and Sophocles’ drama which bears his name. . . .

The action of the play consists in nothing other than the process of revealing, with cunning delays and ever-mounting excitement—a process that can be likened to the work of a psycho-analysis—that Oedipus himself is the murderer of Laius, but further that he is the son of the murdered man and of Jocasta. . . .

If Oedipus Rex moves a modern audience no less than it did the contemporary Greek one . . . there must be something which makes a voice within us ready to
recognize the compelling force of destiny in the Oedipus. . . . His destiny moves us because it might have been ours—because the oracle laid the same curse upon us before our birth as upon him. It is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father. Our dreams convince us that this is so. King Oedipus, who slew his father Laius and married his mother Jocasta, merely shows us the fulfilment of our childhood wishes. . . . While the poet . . . brings to light the guilt of Oedipus, he is at the same time compelling us to recognize our own inner minds, in which those same impulses, though suppressed, are still to be found.4

Freud’s reference to the Oedipus as a key-narrative—the specimen story of psychoanalysis—is structured by three questions which support his analytical interrogation:

1) The question of the effectiveness of the story (Why is the story so compelling, moving? How to account for the story’s practical effect on the audience—its power to elicit affect, its symbolic efficacy?)

2) The question of the recognition (The story has power over us because it “is compelling us to recognize” something in ourselves. What is it that the story is compelling us to recognize? What is at stake in the recognition?)

3) The question of the validity of the hypothesis, of the theory (“a legend whose profound and universal power to move can only be understood if the hypothesis I have put forward in regard to the psychology of children has an equally universal validity”).

Any further inquiry into, or rethinking of, the significance of the Oedipus in psychoanalytic theory and practice, would have to take into account the implications of those three questions: the question of the narrative’s practical efficacy (and hence, its potential for a clinical efficacy: its practical effect on us, having to do not necessarily with what the story means, but with what it does to us); the question of the meaning of the theoretical recognition (what do we recognize when we recognize the Oedipus?); and the question not just of the mere validity of Freud’s hypothesis, but of the very status of the theoretical validation through a narrative, that is, the question of the relationship between truth and fiction in psychoanalysis.

I would suggest, now, that Lacan’s reading of Freud renews, indeed, each of these questions in some crucial ways; and that an exploration of this renewal—an exploration of the way in which the Oedipus mythic reference holds the key to a Lacanian psychoanalytic understanding—may hold the key; in turn, to the crux of Lacan’s innovative and enriching insight into what it is that Freud
discovered, and consequently, into what it is psychoanalysis is all about.

The Psychoanalytic Story: Oedipus the King

Nowhere is there in Lacan's writings any systematic exposition of Lacan's specific understanding of the significance of the Oedipus. As is often the case, Lacan's insight has to be derived, through a reading labor, from an elliptical and fragmentary text, from sporadic comments, from episodic highlights of (often critical and corrective) interpretations, and from the omnipresent literary usage of the reference to the Oedipus in Lacan's own rhetoric and style. My attempt at a creative systematization of what may be called Lacan's revision of the Oedipus would organize itself, in a structure of its own, as a relation between (the refraction of an insight through) three dimensions: 1) the purely theoretical dimension: how does Lacan understand (or modify the traditional understanding of) the basic psychoanalytic concept of "the Oedipus complex"? 2) The practical and clinical dimension: what is, in Lacan's eyes, the practical relevance of the Oedipus to the clinical event, to the practical dealings with a patient? 3) The literary dimension: How does Lacan understand the way in which the text of Sophocles informs psychoanalytic knowledge?

While Freud reads Sophocles's text in view of the consolidation—the confirmation—of his theory, Lacan re-reads the Greek text, after Freud, with an eye to its specific pertinence not to theory but to psychoanalytic practice. Freud, already, had compared the drama of the Oedipus to the process of a practical psychoanalysis ("The action of the play consists in nothing other than the process of revealing . . . a process that can be likened to the work of a psychoanalysis"). But while this comparison between the literary work and the work of the analysand leads Freud to the confirmation of his theory—a theory of wish, of wish-fulfilment and of primordial Oedipal desires (incestuous and patricidal), Lacan's different analytic emphasis on the relevance of Oedipus to the clinician's practice, is not so much on wish as on the role of speech—of language—in the play.

What Freud discovered in, or through, the Oedipus—the unconscious nature of desire—implies, in Lacan's view, a structural relation between language and desire: a desire that articulates itself, sub-
stitutively, in a symbolic metonymic language which, thereby, is no longer recognizable by the subject.

It is always at the juncture of speech, at the level of its apparition, its emergence, ... that the manifestation of desire is produced. Desire emerges at the moment of its incarnation into speech—it is coincident with the emergence of symbolism.

(S-II, 273)

No wonder, then, that Oedipus Rex, dramatizing as it does the primal scene of desire, in effect takes place on the other scene of language. “The unconscious”, says Lacan, “is the discourse of the other.” Oedipus Rex could be viewed as nothing other than a spectacular dramatization, a calculated pedagogical demonstration, of this formula. For Oedipus’ unconscious is quite literally embodied by the discourse of the Other—of the oracle.

Oedipus’ unconscious is nothing other than this fundamental discourse whereby, long since, for all time, Oedipus’ history is out there—written, and we know it, but Oedipus is ignorant of it, even as he is played out by it since the beginning. This goes way back—remember how the Oracle frightens his parents, and how he is consequently exposed, rejected. Everything takes place in function of the Oracle and of the fact that Oedipus is truly other than what he realizes as his history—he is the son of Laius and Jocasta, and he starts out his life ignorant of this fact. The whole pulsation of the drama of his destiny, from the beginning to the end, hinges on the veiling of this discourse, which is his reality without his knowing it.

(S-II, 245)6

The unconscious is this subject unknown to the self, misapprehended, misrecognized, by the ego.

(S-II, 59)

The Oedipal question is thus at the center of each practical psychoanalysis, not necessarily as a question addressing the analysand’s desire for his parents, but as a question addressing the analysand’s misapprehension, misrecognition [mécognition] of his own history.

The subject’s question in no way refers to the results of any specific weaning, abandonment, or vital lack of love or affection; it concerns the subject’s history inasmuch as the subject misapprehends, misrecognizes it; this is what the subject’s actual conduct is expressing in spite of himself, insofar as he obscurely seeks to recognize this history. His life is guided by a problematics which is not that of his life-experience, but that of his destiny, that is—what is the meaning, the significance of his history? What does his life-story mean?

An utterance is the matrix of the misrecognized part of the subject, and this is the specific level of the analytic symptom—a level which is de-centered with respect to the individual experience, since it is, precisely, what the historical text must integrate.

(S-II, 58)

Analysis is, indeed, nothing other than this process of historical integration of the spoken—but misrecognized—part of the sub-
ject. To do this, the subject must—like Oedipus—\textit{recognize} what he \textit{misrecognizes}, namely, his desire, and his history, inasmuch as they are, both, unconscious (that is, insofar as his \textit{life-history} differs from what he can know, or own, as his \textit{life-story}).

What we teach the subject to \textit{recognize} as his unconscious is his history—that is to say, we help him to complete the present historization of the facts that have already determined a certain number of historical ‘turning-points’ in his existence. But if they have played this role, they did so already as facts of history, that is to say, in so far as they have been \textit{recognized} in a certain sense or censored in a certain order.

(E 261, N 52, TM)

As in Freud’s case, the reference of the clinical practice of psychoanalysis to the literary drama of the Oedipus hinges on the central question of the \textit{recognition} (as opposed to what the subject had, beforehand, censored or misrecognized, misapprehended, or repressed). Recognition is, indeed, for Freud as for Lacan, the crucial \textit{psychoanalytic stake} both of the clinical and of the literary work.

The nature of the recognition is, however, somewhat differently conceived, in Freud’s discussion of the Oedipus as validating psychoanalytic \textit{theory}, and in Lacan’s discussion of the Oedipus as illuminating psycho-analytic \textit{practice}. In Freud’s analysis, Oedipus recognizes his desire (incest, patricide) as (unwittingly) fulfilled, whereas Sophocles’s reader recognizes in himself the same desire, as repressed. The recognition is thus constative, or \textit{cognitive}. In Lacan’s different emphasis, however, the psychoanalytic recognition is radically tied up with language, with the subject’s analytic speech-act, and as such, its value is less cognitive than \textit{performativé}?: it is, itself, essentially a speech-act, whose symbolic action \textit{modifies} the subject’s history, rather than cerebrally observing or recording it, at last correctly.

To bring the subject to \textit{recognize} and to \textit{name} his desire, this is the nature of the efficacious action of analysis. But it is not a question of recognizing something that would have already been there—a given—ready to be captured. In naming it, the subject creates, gives rise to something new, makes something new present in the world.

(S-II, 267)

Analysis can have for its goal only \textit{the advent} of an authentic speech and the realization by the subject of his history, \textit{in relation to a future}.

(E 302, N 88, TM)

The analytical speech-act by which the subject recognizes, and performatively names, his desire and his history (insofar as the misapprehension of the one has in effect structured the other), has to be completed, consummated, by an ultimate analytic act of speech
which Lacan calls "the assumption of one's history", that is, the ultimate acceptance—and endorsement—of one's destiny, the acknowledgment of responsibility for the discourse of the Other in oneself, but also the forgiving of this discourse.

It is certainly this assumption of his history by the subject, in so far as it is constituted by the speech addressed to the other, that constitutes the ground for the new method that Freud called Psycho-analysis.

(E 257, N 48)

Oedipus the King, however, in Lacan's eyes, while recognizing, naming his desire and his history, does not truly assume them; at the end of Oedipus Rex, Oedipus accepts his destiny, but does not accept (forgive) himself. This is why Lacan would like to take us, as he puts it (in a formula that once again is resonant with many meanings), beyond Oedipus: that is, first of all beyond Oedipus the King and into Sophocles' tragic sequel, Oedipus at Colonus.

If the tragedy of Oedipus Rex is an exemplary literary work, psychoanalysts should also know this beyond which is realized by the tragedy of Oedipus at Colonus.

(S-II, 245)

II

Beyond Oedipus: Oedipus at Colonus

It is only in the tragic sequel that the true assumption of his destiny by Oedipus takes place:

In Oedipus at Colonus, Oedipus says the following sentence: "Is it now that I am nothing, that I am made to be a man?" This is the end of Oedipus' psychoanalysis—Oedipus' psychoanalysis ends only at Colonus. . . . This is the essential moment which gives its whole meaning to his history.

(S-II, 250)

What Lacan refers to is the following scene, which I will now quote twice, in two different translations:

Oedipus
And did you think the gods would yet deliver me?

Ismene
The present oracles give me that hope.

Oedipus
What oracles are they? What prophecy?

Ismene
The people of Thebes shall desire you, for their safety, After your death, and even while you live.

Oedipus
What good can such as I bring any man?
Ismene
They say it is in you that they must grow to greatness.

Oedipus
Am I made man in the hour when I cease to be? (Walting’s translation)

Oedipus
You have some hope than that they [the gods] are concerned
With my deliverance?

Ismene
I have, father.
The latest sentences of the oracle...

Oedipus
How are they worded? What do they prophesy?

Ismene
The oracles declare their strength’s in you—

Oedipus
When I am finished, I suppose I am strong!

(Grene’s translation)

"Is it now that I am nothing that I am made to be a man?" What is it, then, which makes for Oedipus’ humanity and strength at the very moment at which he is “finished”, at the moment when, reduced to nothing, he embodies his forthcoming death? What is it that Oedipus, beyond the recognition of his destiny, here assumes, and which exemplifies “the end of his analysis”? He assumes the Other—in himself, he assumes his own relation to the discourse of the Other, “this subject beyond the subject” (S-II, 245); he assumes, in other words, his radical de-centerment from his own ego, from his own self-image (Oedipus the King) and his own (self-) consciousness. And it is this radical acceptance, and assumption, of his own self-expropriation that embodies, for Lacan, the ultimate meaning of Oedipus’ analysis, as well as the profound Oedipal significance of analysis as such.

This significance is historically consummated by Oedipus at the moment when he awaits—and indeed assumes—his death. But this is not just a coincidence: the assumption of one’s death is inherent to the analytical assumption.

You will have to read Oedipus at Colonus. You will see that the last word of man’s relation to this discourse which he does not know is—death.

(S-II, 245)

Why death? Here Lacan is at his most hermetic, at his most elliptical. I believe, however, that this ellipsis embodies one of his
most complex, profound and important psychoanalytic insights, and I will try—at my own risk—to shed some light on it by continuing, now, the analysis of Oedipus at Colonus “beyond” what Lacan explicitly articulates, by using some Lacanian highlights borrowed from other texts (other contexts). Let me first make an explanatory detour.

The Oedipus complex, in its traditional conception, encompasses two fantasized (“imaginary”) visions of death: the father’s death (imaginary murder), and the subject’s own death in return (imaginary castration). The Oedipus complex is resolved through the child’s identification with his father, constituting his superego; in Lacan’s terms, the resolution takes place through the introjection of the Father’s Name10 (embodying the Law of incest prohibition), which becomes constitutive of the child’s unconscious. As the first, archetypal linguistic symbol (“name”) which represses, and replaces, or displaces, the desire for the mother, the father’s name (and consequently, in the chain of linguistic or symbolic substitution, any word or symbol used metaphorically or metonymically, that is, all symbols and all words), in effect incorporates the child’s assumption of his own death as a condition—and a metaphor—for his renunciation. Since symbolization is coincident with the constitution of the unconscious (the displacement of desire), “the last word of man’s relation to this discourse which he does not know”—his unconscious—“is [thus] death”: to symbolize is to incorporate death in language, in order to survive.

So when we wish to attain in the subject what was before the serial articulations of speech, and what is primordial to the birth of symbols, we find it in death, from which his existence takes on all the meaning it has.

(E 320, N 105)

Thus the symbol manifests itself first of all as the murder of the thing, and this death constitutes in the subject the eternization of his desire.

The first symbol in which we recognize humanity in its vestigial traces is the grave, and the intermediary of death can be recognized in every relation through which man is born into the life of his history.

(E 319, N 104, TM)

What, now, happens in Oedipus at Colonus which is new with respect to the story (to the recognition story) of Oedipus the King (besides the subject’s final death)?

Precisely the fact that Oedipus is born, through the assumption of his death (of his radical self-expropiation), into the life of his history. Oedipus at Colonus is about the transformation of Oedipus’ story into history: it does not tell the drama, it is about the telling
(and retelling) of the drama. It is, in other words, about the *historization* of Oedipus' destiny, through the *symbolization*—the transmutation into speech—of the Oedipal desire.

*Oedipus*
My star was unspeakable.

*Chorus*
Speak!

*Oedipus*
My child, what can I say to them?

*Chorus*
Answer us, stranger; what is your race, Who was your father?

*Oedipus*
God help me, what will become of me, child?

*Antigone*
Tell them; there is no other way.  

(Scene 1, 89)

*Oedipus*  
Or do you dread  
My strength? My actions? I think not, for I  
Suffered those deeds more than I acted them,  
As I might show if it were fitting here  
*To tell my father's and my mother's story...*  
For which you fear me, as I know too well.  

(Scene 2, 91)

*Chorus*  
What evil things have slept since long ago  
It is not sweet to awaken;  
*And yet I long to be told—*  

*Oedipus*
What?

*Chorus*  
Of that heartbreak for which there was no help,  
The pain you have had to suffer.

*Oedipus*  
For kindness' sake, do not open  
My old wound, and my shame.

*Chorus*  
*It is told everywhere, and never dies;*  
*I only want to hear it truly told.*  

(Scene 2, 102)
Oedipus
There is, then, nothing left for me to tell.
But my desire; and then the tale is ended.

(Scene 3, 105)

...........

Messenger
Citizens, the briefest way to tell you
Would be to say that Oedipus is no more;
But what has happened cannot be told so simply—
It was no simple thing.

(Scene 8, 147)

Embodying the linguistic drama—the analytical speech-act—of Oedipus' assumption of his radical expropriation, Oedipus at Colonus tells, thus, not simply the story of the telling of the story of the Oedipus, the drama of symbolization and historization of the Oedipal desire, but beyond that ("beyond Oedipus"), as the final verses indicate, the story of the transmutation of Oedipus' death (in all senses of the word, literal and metaphoric) into the symbolic language of the myth.

The fact that Oedipus is the Patronymic hero of the Oedipus complex is not a coincidence. It would have been possible to choose another hero, since all the heroes of Greek mythology have some relation to this myth, which they embody in different forms. . . . It is not without reason that Freud was guided towards this particular myth.

Oedipus, in his very life, is entirely this myth. He himself is nothing other than the passage of this myth into existence.

(S-II, 267–268)

It is natural that everything would fall on Oedipus, since Oedipus embodies the central knot of speech.

(S-II, 269)

Freud at Colonus

At the same time that Oedipus at Colonus dramatizes the "eternization" of the Oedipal desire through its narrative symbolization, that is, Oedipus' birth into his symbolic life, into his historical, mythic survival, the later play also embodies something of the order of an Oedipal death-instinct, since Oedipus, himself the victim of a curse and of a consequent parental rejection, pronounces, in his turn, a mortal curse against his sons. Oedipus' destiny is thus marked by a repetition-compulsion, illustrating and rejoining, in Lacan's eyes, Freud's tragic intuition in Beyond the Pleasure Principle. Like the later Freud, the later Sophocles narrates, as his ultimate human (psychoanalytic) insight, the conjunction between life and death.
Beyond reading the What emphasis, analytical sight is made of death, that sort of death which is exactly there, beneath life's surface. This is also where we are guided by this text in which Freud is telling us, 'Don't believe that life . . . is made of any force . . . of progress, life . . . is characterized by nothing other than . . . its capacity for death'. 

Freud's theory may appear . . . to account for everything, including what relates to death, in the framework of a closed libidinal economy, regulated by the pleasure principle and by the return to equilibrium. . . .

The meaning of Beyond the Pleasure Principle is that this explanation is insufficient. . . . What Freud teaches us through the notion of primordial masochism is that the last word of life, when life has been dispossessed of speech, can only be this ultimate curse which finds expression at the end of Oedipus at Colonus. Life does not want to heal. . . . What is, moreover, the significance of the healing, of the cure, if not the realization, by the subject, of a speech which comes from elsewhere, and by which he is traversed?

(S-II, 271–272)

What Lacan endeavors here is obviously not a simple reading of the literary Oedipus in terms of Freud's theory, but rather, a re-reading of Freud's theory in terms of the literary Oedipus. Lacan's emphasis, as usual, is corrective with respect to a certain psychoanalytical tradition that tends to disregard Freud's speculations in Beyond the Pleasure Principle as "overpessimistic" and "unscientific," not truly belonging in his theory. For Lacan, however, Beyond the Pleasure Principle is absolutely crucial to any understanding of psychoanalysis, since it embodies the ultimate riddle which Freud's insight has confronted-and attempted to convey:

. . . Freud has bequeathed us his testament on the negative therapeutic reaction. The key to this mystery, it is said, is in the agency of a primordial masochism, that is, in a pure manifestation of that death instinct whose enigma Freud pronounced for us at the climax of his experience.

We cannot turn up our noses at this problem, any more than I can postpone an examination of it here.

For I note this same refusal to accept this culminating point of Freud's doctrine by those who conduct their analysis on the basis of a conception of the Ego [ego psychology], and by those who, like Reich, go so far in the principle of seeking the ineffable organic expression beyond speech that . . . [they expect from analysis something like an] orgasmic induction.

(E 316, N 101, TM)

In reading Freud across Oedipus at Colonus, Lacan is doing much more than to suggest an affinity of subjects between Freud's and Sophocles's later works (the constitutive, structural relation between life and death: primordial masochism, death-instinct, repetition compulsion). Lacan is using the relation between Oedipus at Colonus and Oedipus the King (the undeniable relation, that is, of the later literary work to the specimen narrative of psychoanalysis) in order to illuminate and to make a claim for the importance of
Beyond the Pleasure Principle. Oedipus at Colonus, says Lacan, is taking us beyond Oedipus, in much the same was as Freud is taking us Beyond the pleasure principle. By this multi-levelled, densely resonant comparison, Lacan is elliptically, strategically suggesting two things:

1) That Beyond the Pleasure Principle stands to The Interpretation of Dreams (the work in which Freud narrates, for the first time, his discovery of the significance of Oedipus the King) in precisely the same relation in which Oedipus at Colonus stands to Oedipus the King;

2) That the significance of the rejection of Freud's later text by a certain psychoanalytical establishment (embodying the consciousness of the psychoanalytic movement, that is, its own perception of itself, its own self-image), is itself part of an Oedipal story: the story, once again, of the misrecognition—misapprehension and mis-reading—of a history and of a discourse.

The unconscious is that part of the concrete discourse . . . which is not at the disposal of the subject in re-establishing the continuity of his conscious discourse. (E 258, N 490)

The unconscious is that chapter of my history which is marked by a blank . . . : it is the censored chapter. (E 259, N50)

The Oedipal significance of psychoanalysis' misrecognition of its own discourse, of its own history, can only be seen from Colonus. In confining itself, however, to Oedipus the King and to Freud's concomitant discovery of wish-fulfilment (as theorized in the Interpretation of Dreams), the psychoanalytic movement, far from going—as did Freud—beyond Oedipus, is still living only the last scene of Oedipus the King, in repeating consciousness' last gesture of denial: the self-blinding.

Lacan, on the other hand, strives to make the psychoanalytic movement recognize what it misrecognizes, and thus reintegrate the repressed—the censored Freudian text—into psychoanalytic history—and theory.

Why is Freud's Beyond the Pleasure Principle so important? Why is it not possible to dispense with this final phase of Freud's thought, in much the same way as it is impossible to dispense with Oedipus at Colonus? Because, let us not forget, "Oedipus' analysis ends only at Colonus. . . . This is the essential moment which gives its whole meaning to his history" (S-II, 250). In what sense can Beyond the Pleasure Principle be said to give its whole meaning to psychoanalytic history? In the sense that what is beyond the wish for pleasure—the
compulsion to repeat—radically displaces the conception both of history and of meaning, both of what and how history means and of how meaning comes to be, and is historicized. This radical displacement of the understanding both of meaning and of temporality (or history), far from being episodic, marginal, dispensable, is essential both to psychoanalytic theory (what has happened in the subject's past) and to psychoanalytic practice (what is happening in the subject's present: the concrete unfolding of unconscious history in the repetition of the transference [E 318, N 102]). Since the compulsion to repeat is, in Lacan's view, the compulsion to repeat a signifier, Beyond the Pleasure Principle holds the key not just to history or to transference but, specifically, to the textual functioning of signification, that is, to the insistence of the signifier in a signifying chain (that of a text, or of a life).

What is, then, psychoanalysis if not, precisely, a life-usage of the death-instinct—a practical, productive usage of the compulsion to repeat, through a replaying of the symbolic meaning of the death the subject has repeatedly experienced, and through a recognition and assumption of the meaning of this death (separation, loss) by the subject, as a symbolic means of his coming to terms not with death but, precisely, with his life?

The game is already played, the dice are already thrown, with this one exception, that we can take them once more in our hand, and throw them once again.

(S-II, 256)

This is what a practical psychoanalysis is all about; and this is what Freud tells us in his later speculative narrative, which seeks its way beyond the pleasure principle, beyond his earlier discovery of wish-fulfilment, beyond his earlier wish-fulfilling way of dreaming Sophocles.

"The Oedipus complex", says Lacan in one of those suggestive, richly understated statements (pronounced in an unpublished Seminar), "the Oedipus complex is—a dream of Freud." This apparently transparent sentence is, in effect, a complex re-statement of the way psychoanalysis is staked in the discovery that The Interpretation of Dreams narrates: a complex re-statement both of Freud's discovery of the theory of wish-fulfilment as the meaning—and the motivating force—of dreams, and of Freud’s discovery of the narrative of Oedipus as validating the discovery of the theory. It was, in effect, through his self-analysis, out of his own dream about his father that revealed to Freud his own Oedipal complexity, that
Freud retrieved the founding, psychoanalytic meaning of the literary Oedipus. “The Oedipus complex is a dream of Freud.”

Now, a dream (to any psychoanalyst, at least) is not the opposite of truth; but neither is it truth that can be taken literally, at face value. A dream is what demands interpretation. And interpretation is what goes beyond the dream, even if interpretation is itself nothing other than another dream, that is, not a theory, but still another (free-associated) narrative, another metaphorical account of the discourse of the Other.

In this respect, it is noteworthy that Beyond the Pleasure Principle was at first conceived by Freud as, precisely, a rethinking of his theory of dreams. This is born out by a paper Freud gave at the International Psychoanalytic Congress at The Hague (1920) under the title, “Supplements to the Theory of Dreams,” and in which he announces his forthcoming publication. Here is how the paper’s goal is summed up in the “author’s abstract”:

The speaker dealt with three points touching upon the theory of dreams. The first two . . . were concerned with the thesis that dreams are wish-fulfilments and brought forward some necessary modifications of it. . . .

The speaker explained that, alongside the familiar wishful dreams and the anxiety dreams which could easily be included in the theory, there were grounds for recognizing the existence of a third category, to which he gave the name of “punishment dreams”. . . .

Another class of dreams, however, seemed to the speaker to present a more serious exception to the rule that dreams are wish-fulfilments. These were the so-called “traumatic” dreams. They occur in patients suffering from accidents, but they also occur during psychoanalyses of neurotics and bring back to them forgotten traumas of childhood. In connection with the problem of fitting these dreams into the theory of wish-fulfilment, the speaker referred to a work shortly to be published under the title, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle.”

(Standard, XVIII, 4)

Beyond the Pleasure Principle is thus itself a sort of (differential) repetition of The Interpretation of Dreams, in much the same way as Oedipus at Colonus is a (differential) repetition of Oedipus the King.

Indeed, like Oedipus the King, The Interpretation of Dreams is the story of a riddle—and of its solution. Oedipus solves, first, the riddle of the Sphinx (by the answer “man”), and then the riddle of who is responsible for Laius’ murder (by the answer “I, Oedipus”). Freud solves the riddle of the meaning of the dream (by the answer: “wish-fulfilment”). While Oedipus goes from the general, theoretical solution (“man”) to the singular, narrative solution (“me”), Freud goes from the narrative solution (self-analysis, me, Oedipus) to the theoretical solution (Man, wish-fulfilment).

The later text, however, in both Freud and Sophocles, is not a simple “supplement” or sequel to the early work, but its problema-
tization. Both later works address the riddle generated by, precisely, the solution, the question constituted by the very answer. Both later works embody the enigma of an excess, a subversive residue, to (from within) the earlier solution: the enigma of the traumatic dream,11 in Beyond the Pleasure Principle, insofar as this compulsion to repeat manifested as death-instinct is not reducible to (goes beyond) wish-fulfilment; the enigma, in Oedipus at Colonus, of Oedipus’ assumption of (the gift inherent in) his own death, of (the blessing incarnated in) his own radical self-expropriation, insofar as this enigma is not reducible to (goes beyond) Oedipus the King’s ultimate self-recognition, amounting to the self-denial and the self-appropriation inherent, paradoxically enough, in the final gesture of self-blinding.

In both Freud and Sophocles, the final text narrates, thus, the return of a riddle. In much the same way as the author of Beyond the Pleasure Principle talks about (to borrow Lacan’s terms)—

this mystery . . . that death instinct whose enigma Freud propounded at the climax of his experience—

(E 316, N 101, TM)

Oedipus at Colonus (very unlike Oedipus the King) talks about (to borrow Sophocles’s terms)—

These things [which] are mysteries, not to be explained. (Scene 7, 145)

And Oedipus, like Freud, is conveying this residual enigma from the position of a teacher: “Indeed, you know already all that I teach” (Ibid., 146), says Oedipus to Theseus.

This final teaching is, however, dramatized in Oedipus at Colonus as a blessing Oedipus imparts by the mystery in which his death is destined to be wrapped. Now, a blessing is, not the gift of a solution (in the manner of Oedipus the King), but nonetheless a gift—of speech. At Colonus, Oedipus ends up presenting, then, not a solution but the very paradoxical gift of an enigma: the gift (of speech, the blessing) of the enigma of his own death. And in Sophocles’s words, in which Oedipus announces, at Colonus, both the gift of his own death and (the gift of) the return of a riddle, we may assume Lacan is hearing Freud’s own words beyond his pleasure principle, in that work in which Freud, in his turn, talks about death as a riddle:

Oedipus
I come to give you something, and the gift
Is my own beaten self; no feast for the eyes;
Yet in me is a more lasting grace than beauty.
Theseus
What grace is this you say you bring to us?

Oedipus
In time you'll learn, but not immediately.

Theseus
How long, then, must we wait to be enlightened?

Oedipus
Until I am dead, and you have buried me.

(Scene 3, 105-106)

The psychoanalytical establishment may have come to the conclusion that they no longer have “to wait to be enlightened,” since they may believe they have, indeed, in burying Beyond the Pleasure Principle, buried Freud. If Freud, however, is like Oedipus, Oedipus is, paradoxically enough, not buried—not yet buried—since the mystery (the riddle) of his mythic disparition is precisely such that Oedipus does die (or disappears), but without leaving a corpse.

And it is Lacan who tells us, in the words of Sophocles’ messenger, this essential thing, that Freud is not yet buried:

Messenger
Citizens, the briefest way to tell you
Would be to say that Oedipus is no more;
But what has happened cannot be told so simply—
It was no simple thing.

(Scene 8, 147)

While Freud, as Dream Interpreter, may have, indeed, said in the very words of Oedipus,

There is, then, nothing left for me to tell
But my desire; and then the tale is ended.

(Scene 3, 105)

—and while psychoanalysts may take Freud at his word, believe, in other words, that in the meaning of the wish-fulfilment, in the meaning of Freud’s story of desire, the tale is ended—Lacan is there to tell us that not only is the tale (Freud’s, Oedipus’) not ended, but that Freud is bequeathing us Beyond the Pleasure Principle so as to tell us nothing other than this ultimate discovery, this ultimate enigma: that the tale has, in effect, no end.

Lacan at Colonus

Thus, it is psychoanalysis itself, and not its object, which is now staked in the literary narrative, in the story of the Oedipus. From the perspective of Colonus, Lacan is telling us, re-telling us, the
very story of psychoanalysis as “what cannot be told so simply: it was no simple thing.” And the story of psychoanalysis is not just the “not simple” story Freud tells (and re-tells), but the very story of Freud’s telling and re-telling, the narrative, in other words, of *Freud himself as narrator*. And Freud as narrator is also far from being—says Lacan—a *simple* narrator.

Indeed, this non-simplicity of the narration—of Freud’s narration of his theory—is crucial to an understanding of the theory itself. If *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is, like the Oedipus, not a simple story, it is to the extent that it is, first and foremost, a *strategic* story. And what we have to understand, what Lacan is urging us to *recognize* in Freud’s account, is the thrust, precisely, of Freud’s strategy as narrator: not just what the story teller *means to say*, but (once again) what the story teller in effect *is doing* with, and through, his story.

In the final analysis, . . . we can talk adequately about the libido only in a *mythic* manner. . . . This is what is at stake in Freud’s text. . . .

At what point, at what moment, does Freud talk to us about a *beyond* of the pleasure principle? At a point where the psychoanalysts, engaged in the path that Freud has taught them, believe they know. Freud has told them that desire is sexual desire, and they believe him.

*(S-II, 265)*

The Freudian experience starts out with a notion which is exactly contrary to the theoretical perspective. It starts out by positing a universe of desire. . . .

In the classical, theoretical perspective, there is between subject and object a co-fitting, a co-gnizance [: knowledge, that is, possible adaptation, possible adequation]. . . .

It is in an altogether different register of relations that the Freudian experience is inscribed. Desire is a relation of a being to a lack. . . . The libido is the name of what animates the fundamental conflict at the heart of human action. . . . Insofar as the libido creates the different stages of the object [oral, anal, etc.], no object would ever again be *it* [:of no object can desire ever say: *that’s it*.]. . . .

Desire, a function central to the whole of human experience, is the desire of nothing nameable.

*(S-II, 260-262)*

When Freud maintains that sexual desire is at the heart of human desire, all his followers believe him, believe him so strongly that they persuade themselves that it’s all so very *simple*, and that all there remains to do with it is science, the science of sexual desire. It would suffice to remove the obstacles, and it should work all by itself. It would suffice to tell the patient—you don’t realize it, but the object is there. This is how, at first, the stake of interpretation is understood.

But the fact is, it doesn’t work. At this point—the turning point—it is said that the subject resists. Why? Because Freud has said so. But one has not understood what it means to *resist* any more than one has understood the meaning of *sexual desire*. One believes one has to push. At this point, the analyst himself succumbs to a delusion. I have shown you what the insistance means on the part of the suffering subject. Now, the analyst is putting himself at the same level,
he too insists in his own way, a way which is however much more stupid, because conscious. . . .

Resistance is . . . the current state of interpretation of the subject. It is the manner in which, at this moment, the subject interprets the point where he's at. This resistance is an abstract, ideal point. It's you who call that resistance. It only means that the subject cannot advance more quickly. . . .

There is only one resistance, the resistance of the analyst. The analyst resists when he does not understand what is happening in the treatment. He does not understand what is happening in the treatment when he believes that interpreting is showing to the subject that what he desires is such and such sexual object. He is mistaken. . . . It's he who is in a state of inertia and of resistance.

The psychoanalytic goal is, on the contrary, to teach the subject to name, to articulate, to pass into existence this desire which is, literally, beneath existence, and for that very reason, insists. . . .

To bring the subject to recognize and to name his desire, this is the nature of the efficacious action of analysis. But it is not a question of recognizing something that would have already been there—a given. . . .

Since, in a sort of balancing, we always place ourselves between the text of Freud and our practical experience, I urge you to return now to Freud's text, so as to realize that the Beyond [of the pleasure principle] situates desire, in effect, beyond any instinctual cycle, specifically definable by its conditions.

(S-II, 266-267)

“In the final analysis, we can talk adequately about the libido only in a mythic manner: this is what is at stake in Freud's text”. In Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Freud creates a new myth—that of the “death-instinct”—so as to demystify the literal belief in, and the simplified interpretation of, his first myth of the Oedipus. Freud is thus, essentially, a demystifying narrator. But the narrative strategy of demystification takes place only through a new narrative mythification. In urging us to go beyond the myth, Freud also tells us that beyond the myth there is, forever, but another myth. And it is in this sense, among others, that “the tale” (Freud's, Oedipus', Lacan's) is never “ended.”

But who is speaking here? Whose irony is it that here traverses the narration of the psychoanalytic story, and which unends the (Oedipal, or Freudian, or Lacanian) tale? Lacan's voice fuses here with Freud's in what Lacan would doubtless call, a [narrative] "in-mixture of the subjects"12: the story of Freud's strategy as psychoanalytic narrator is, simultaneously, the story of Lacan as psychoanalytic educator. So that if we ask, “whose story is it (Freud's? Lacan's? or Oedipus?)”—the answer is not clear. And if we ask, “whose narrative voice is carrying through this narrative performance (Freud's? Lacan's? or Sophocles?)”—the answer is clear. But if we ask, what is this narrative performance doing?—the answer is quite clear. If we ask, that is, in a Lacanian manner, the question, not of who is the true owner of the story (to whom does
it belong?), nor of whom Lacan is *quoting* in the story, nor of what Lacan *means* by the story, but of what Lacan is *doing* with this story, the answer would be unambiguous: Lacan is *training analysts*. Lacan as narrator of Freud as narrator, Lacan as narrator of Sophocles as narrator, Lacan in everything he says of does, and in the very way he breathes (breathes texts and breathes psychoanalytic practice), is always, above all, a *training analyst*.

And this is why, no doubt, he picks Colonus as the truly psychoanalytic place: for if Colonus—and Colonus only—marks “the end of Oedipus’ psychoanalysis,” it is to the extent that Oedipus’ tale of desire ends only through its own dramatic, narrative discovery that the tale has, in effect, no end: “the end of Oedipus’ analysis,” in other words, is the discovery that analysis, and in particular didactic self-analysis, is in effect *interminable*. In dramatizing Oedipus’ assumption of his own death, of his own expropriating discourse of the Other, and his analytic passage *beyond* his ego, Colonus, as “the end of Oedipus’ psychoanalysis,” marks the moment at which the analysand becomes an analyst, ready to bestow, indeed, (precisely that by which Lacan has characterized the analyst’s spoken intervention:) a *gift of speech*. Colonus echoes, thus, Lacan’s preoccupation as a training analyst.

But if Colonus resonates so forcefully in Lacan’s heart, strikes such a forceful chord in Lacan’s insight, it is because Lacan, perhaps unconsciously, identifies with Oedipus at Colonus. While Freud identifies quite naturally with Oedipus the King or the conquistador, *the riddle-solver* (who is, incidentally, a father-killer and a mother-lover: *King to his own mother*), even as he knows that this stupendous riddle-solving in effect will bring about “the Plaque”¹³, Lacan identifies quite naturally with Oedipus *the exile* (a survivor of the Plaque), since Lacan has been, precisely as a training analyst, expropriated, *excommunicated* from the International Psychoanalytical Association.

I am here, in the posture which is mine, in order to address always the same question—*what does psychoanalysis mean?* . . .

The place from which I am re-addressing this problem is in effect a place which has changed, which is no longer altogether inside, and of which one does not know whether it is outside.

This reminder is not anecdotic: . . . I hand you this, which is a fact—that my teaching, designated as such, has been the object of a quite extraordinary *censorship* declared by an organism which is called the *Executive Committee* of an international organization which is called *The International Psychoanalytical Association*. What is at stake is nothing less than the prohibition of my teaching, which must be considered as *null and void* insofar as it concerns the habilitation of psychoanalysts; and this proscription has been made the condition for the affil-
iation of the psychoanalytic society of which I am a member with the International Psychoanalytic Association. . .

What is at stake is, therefore something of the order of what is called . . . a major excommunication. . .

I believe . . . that, not only by the echoes it evokes, but by the very structure it implies, this fact introduces something which is at the very principle of our interrogation concerning psychoanalytic practice.

(S-XI, 9)

Colonus thus embodies, among other things, not just Lacan's own exile, Lacan's own story of expropriation from the International Psychoanalytical Association, but Lacan's dramatic, tragic understanding that psychoanalysis is radically about expropriation, and his assumption of his story, his assumption, that is, all at once of his own death and of his own myth—of the legacy of this expropriation—as his truly destined psychoanalytic legacy and as his truly training psychoanalytic question: "Is it now that I am nothing, that I am made to be a man?"

"It was ordained: I recognize it now", says Oedipus at Colonus (Scene 1,81). It may be but my own dream, but I can hear, indeed, Lacan's voice in the very words of Oedipus the exile:

Oedipus
That stranger is I. As they say of the blind,
Sounds are the things I see.

(Scene 1, 85)

. . . . . . .

Ismene
The oracles declare their strength's in you—

Oedipus
When I am finished, I suppose I am strong!

(Scene 2, 96)

. . . . . . .

Oedipus
I come to give you something, and the gift
Is my own beaten self: no feast for the eyes;
Yet in me is a more lasting grace than beauty.

Theseus
What grace is this you say you bring to us?

Oedipus
In time you'll learn, but not immediately.

Theseus
How long, then, must we wait to be enlightened?

Oedipus
Until I am dead, and you have buried me.

(Scene 3, 106)
Psychoanalysis at Colonus

At the same time, then, that Lacan is talking about *Oedipus at Colonus*, he is telling and retelling, not just Freud’s, and his own, psychoanalytic story, but the very story of psychoanalysis, *seen from Colonus*: the story of Freud’s going beyond Freud, of Oedipus’ going beyond Oedipus, the story of psychoanalysis’ inherent, radical, and destined self-expropriation. Lacan thus recapitulates at once the meaning of the story in which Freud is taking us beyond his own solution to the riddle, and the narrative voice—or the narrative movement—by which Freud *expropriates*, in fact, not just his own solution, but *his own narrative*.

In subscribing to Freud’s psychoanalytic *self-recognition* in the Oedipus, as the moment of psychoanalysis’ self-appropriation, its coming into the possession of its (“scientific”) knowledge, and in censoring *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as “non-scientific,” the psychoanalytical establishment has, precisely, tried to censor, to repress this final Freudian self-expropriation, and this ominous narrative annunciation, by the “father of the psychoanalytic movement,” of an inherent *exile of psychoanalysis*: an exile from the presence-to-itself of psychoanalytic truth; an exile from a *non-mythical access* to truth; an exile, that is, from any final rest in a knowledge guaranteed by the self-possessed kingdom of a theory, and the constrained departure from this kingdom into an uncertain psychoanalytic *destiny of erring*.

Counter this rejection of Freud’s text, counter this repression, not just of Freud’s insight, but of the very revolution involved in Freud’s narration (in the unprecedented, self-trespassing, self-expropriating status of his narrative), Lacan has raised his training, psychoanalytic voice; but this protestation is, then, censored in its turn. Whatever the polemical pretexts, or the political reasons, given by the Censors, it is clear that the profound (and perhaps unconscious) thrust of the repressive gesture is the same: to eradicate from psychoanalysis the threat of its own self-expropriation (to repeat the Oedipal gesture of self-blinding); to censor, thus, in Freud as well as in Lacan, the radically self-critical, and *self-transgressive*, movement of the psychoanalytic discourse; to pretend, or truly to believe, that this self-transgression and this self-expropriation, far from being the essential, revolutionary feature of the psychoanalytic discourse, is (nothing other than) a historic accident, one particular historic chapter, to be (easily) erased, eliminated.
However, the repeated psychoanalytic censorships illustrate only the effectiveness (the working truth) of Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (or of Sophocles’/Lacan’s *Oedipus at Colonus*): in dramatizing the compulsion to repeat in the very midst of the psychoanalytic institution, they bear witness to the very Freudian story, illustrate the very Freudian myth of (something like) a death-instinct of psychoanalysis itself: the (Oedipal) repetition of a curse in a discourse that is destined to bestow speech as a blessing.

Through his call for “a return to Freud”—a *return to Colonus*—Lacan himself embodies, in the history of the psychoanalytic movement, a return of the repressed. This is why, like Oedipus at Colonus, he too announces (and his entire style is but a symptom of this announcement) the return of a riddle.

*Theseus*
What grace is this you say you bring to us?

*Oedipus*
In time you’ll learn, but not immediately.

*Theseus*
How long, then, must we wait to be enlightened?

*Oedipus*
Until I am dead, and you have buried me.

Lacan’s narrative is, however, at the same time a dramatic repetition, a reminder, of the radical *impossibility of ever burying* the (speech of the) unconscious. The riddle, thus, persists. And so does Lacan’s story, whose subject, in all senses of the word, is, precisely, the *insistence of the riddle*.

What, however, is a riddle, if not a narrative delay (“In time you’ll learn”), the narrative analytical *negociation* of some truth or insight, and their metaphorical approximation *through a myth*? The rejection of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* under the pretext that, as myth, it is “unscientific” ("just a myth"), involves, in Lacan’s view, a radical misunderstanding both of what a myth is all about and of the status of the myth, as such, in Freud’s narration and in psychoanalytic theory. (But then again, the *misrecognition of a myth* is what psychoanalysis—and Oedipus—are all about.)

In the final analysis . . . we can talk adequately about the libido only in a *mythic* manner. . . . This is what is at stake in Freud’s text.

(S-II, 265)

In trying to decipher the significance of Freud’s work, Lacan insists not just on the significance of Freud’s myths, but, even more
importantly, on the (too often overlooked) significance of Freud's acknowledgement of his own myths:

At this point I must note that in order to handle any Freudian concept, reading Freud cannot be considered superfluous, even for those concepts that are homonyms of current notions. This has been well demonstrated, I am opportunely reminded, by the misadventure that befell Freud's theory of the instincts, in a revision of Freud's position by an author less than alert to Freud's explicit statement of the mythical status of this theory.

(E 246, N 39, TM)

Freud's own terms of acknowledgement of his own myth are, indeed, enlightening:

The theory of the instincts is so to say our mythology. Instincts are mythical entities, magnificent in their indefiniteness. In our work, we cannot for a moment disregard them, yet we are never sure that we are seeing them clearly.

(Standard, XXII, 95)

Myth, in Freud, is not a supplement to, or an accident of, theory: it is not external to the theory; it is the very vehicle of theory, a vehicle of mediation between practice and theorization. This complex acknowledgement by Freud of the mythic status of his discourse is reflected, echoed, meditated in Lacan's response:

I would like to give you a more precise idea of the manner in which I plan to conduct this seminar.

You have seen, in my last lectures, the beginning of a reading of what one might call the psychoanalytic myth. This reading goes in the direction, not so much of criticizing this myth, as of measuring the scope of the reality with which it comes to grips, and to which it gives its mythical reply.

(S-I, 24)

The analytical experience, says Lacan, has been involved, since its very origins, not simply with fiction, but with the "truthful" structural necessity of fiction, that is, with its symbolical non-arbitrariness (E 12, 17). Like the analytical experience, the psychoanalytic myth is constituted by "that very truthful fictitious structure" (E 449). Insofar as it is mediated by a myth, the Freudian theory is not a literal translation or reflection of reality, but its symptom, its metaphorical account. The myth is not pure fantasy, however, but a narrative symbolic logic that accounts for a very real mode of functioning, a very real structure of relations. The myth is not reality; but neither is it what it is commonly (mis-)understood to be—a simple opposite of reality. Between reality and the psychoanalytic myth, the relation is not one of opposition, but one of (analytic) dialogue: the myth comes to grips with something in reality that it does not fully apprehend, comprehend, or master, but to which it gives an
answer, a symbolic reply. The function of the myth in psychoanalytic theory is thus evocative of the function of interpretation in the psychoanalytic dialogue: the Freudian mythical account can be thought of as Freud's theoretical gift of speech.

What does that mean? In much the same way as the gift of speech of analytical interpretation, within the situation of the dialogue, acts not by virtue of its accuracy but by virtue of its resonance (whose impact is received in terms of the listener's structure), works, that is, by virtue of its openness to a linguistic passage through the Other, so does the psychoanalytic myth, in resonating in the Other, produce a truthful structure. The psychoanalytic myth, in other words, derives its theoretical effectiveness not from its truth-value, but from its truth-encounter with the other, from its capacity for passing through the Other; from its openness, that is, to an expropriating passage of one insight through another, of one story through another: the passage, for example, of Oedipus the King through Oedipus at Colonus; or the passage of the myth of "Instinct" through this later and more troubling myth of "Death":

As a moment's reflection shows, the notion of the death instinct involves a basic irony, since its meaning has to be sought in the conjunction of two contrary terms: instinc in its most comprehensive acceptation being the law that governs in its succession a cycle of behaviour 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.

(E316-317, N 101-102)

The psychoanalytic experience has discovered 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. May that experience enable you to understand at last that it is in the gift of speech that all the reality of its effects resides; for it is by way of this gift that all reality has come to man and it is by his continued act that he maintains it.

If the domain defined by this gift of speech [says Lacan to an audience of psychoanalysts] is to be sufficient for your action as also for your knowledge, it will also be sufficient for your devotion.

(E 322, N 106)

Lacan's involvement with the Freudian myth (viewed as the literary gift of speech accomplished by Freud's discourse, through the dimension of narration and of narrative in psychoanalytic theory) is, thus, radically involved with the difference Freud is introducing into the conception and the practice of narration, a psychoanalytic difference that Lacan himself is replicating, in his own way, in his own theoretical and mythical gift of speech. Lacan's own involve-
ment with the psychoanalytic difference in narration has three aspects: 1) Lacan’s narration (both the story that he tells and his narrative voice, or style) is very different from the usual psychoanalytical narration of Freud’s accomplishment and theory; 2) Lacan’s narration is about [not identity, ego psychology, but the psychoanalytic myth as the story of the introduction of a] Difference; 3) The psychoanalytical narration, in Lacan’s conception (modeled as it is on analytic dialogue), is always, necessarily, different from itself. In the very way it is narrated, the psychoanalytic theory inscribes (is constituted by) a radical self-difference. And this self-difference, this Spaltung in (within) the theory, this unavoidable breach of theory, is embodied by the myth, is the myth. The myth is thus at once the Other of the theory and that which gives the theory to itself, that which, from within the literary gift of speech, founds the theory. And while there is no possible cognition of the myth—no constative exhaustion of the myth by theory—, there should be a performative acknowledgement (“recognition” and “assumption”) by the theory of its relation to the myth, and of the irreducibility of the myth, as something in the theory which, paradoxically enough, both expropriates it from its truth, and at the same time finds it as “a fictitious truthful structure.” The myth is structurally truthful, and psychoanalytically effective, valid, not just in function of, but in proportion to, its capacity for narrative expropriation.

And this is why, precisely, Freud has privileged the Oedipus above all other myths. In dramatizing language as the scene (the acting out) of the unconscious (in both its clinical and its literary implications), the Oedipus is achetypal of the psychoanalytic myth in that it is the story of the narrative expropriation of the story by itself, the story of, precisely, the acknowledgement of the misrecognition of the story by itself. Misleadingly, the Oedipus appears, at first, to be the myth of a possession (of a kingdom, of a woman, of the solution to a riddle, of one’s own story). But as it turns out, the Oedipus is not the myth of the possession of a story, but the myth, precisely, of the dispossession by the story—the dispossession of the possessor of the story. Any kingdom or possession coming out of the psychoanalytic riddle-solving is, in fact, incestuous, and, as such, is bound to bring about a Plague. Psychoanalysis can only be a gift of speech from the exile of Colonus.

As a narrative of this discovery, as a narrative, that is, not just of a discovery but of the discovery of difference, the story of the Oedipus exemplifies the psychoanalytic myth in that it exemplifies the problematic status of psychoanalysis telling its own story of discovery.
and, while telling, acting out its own unconscious, that is, doing something through the telling that the telling fails to account for, and thus discovering and re-discovering the difference between what it's telling and what it's doing in the telling, as the scene of its own dismantling by the literary myth and of its own theoretical self-subversion. The Oedipus is privileged, thus, as a myth, not just because it is about the creation of the myth (“Oedipus himself is nothing other than the passage of this myth into existence”), but because it is, specifically, about the subversively performative aspect of this mythical creation. The story of the Oedipus is archetypal of the psychoanalytic myth in that it dramatizes speech not as cognitive but as (self-subversively) performative, in that it embodies this performative self-difference of (within) its own narration, this practical discrepancy, forever re-emerging, between its narrative or mythic statement and its narrative or mythical performance.

How, indeed, could speech exhaust the meaning of speech, . . . except in the act that engenders it? Thus Goethe's reversal of its presence at the origins of things, "In the beginning was the act," finds itself reversed in its turn: it was certainly the speech-act that was in the beginning, and we live in its creation, but it is the action of our mind that continues this creation by constantly renewing it. And we can only turn back on that action by allowing ourselves to continue to be driven by it even further.

I know only too well that this will be my own case, too, in trying now to turn back upon the act of speech.

(E 271, N 61, TM)

Beyond Colonus: Truth and Science, or What Remains to be Narrated

If Freud's psychoanalysis is, then, a symbolical reply to a reality it tries to come to grips with; and if this symbolical reply is made of myth—of radical myth which, in Lacan's conception, is absolutely irreducible from psychoanalytic theory—, it is to the extent that, in its function as a gift of speech, the psychoanalytic myth embodies, and derives from, a residue of action in the very process of cognition of that action. In another sense, this is equally what Freud has talked about, in his reference to his theory of the instincts as "his mythology":

Instincts are mythical entities, magnificent in their indefiniteness. In our work we cannot for a moment disregard them, but we are never sure that we are seeing them clearly.

(XXII, 95)

Myth is something which we cannot be sure we are seeing clearly, but with which we work, because it works. Myth is thus a mediation
between action and cognition, between theory and practice, a narrative negociation of difference and self-difference in the very practice of a discourse which purports to be cognitive and theoretical. As we have seen in the Oedipus, myth is, first and foremost, practically efficacious, both clinically and literally. And it is, perhaps, because it thus combines the performative power of the clinical event and the performative power of the literary resonance, the unique performative encounter, that is, of the literary and the clinical dimensions, that the Oedipus has worked so well as the specimen story of psychoanalysis: a specimen story which, however, in the very act of grounding psychoanalytic theory, also points to the irreducible, expropriating residue of action in cognition, of fiction (narrative) in truth, of practice (dialogue) in theory.

Action, fiction, practice, are thus bound together in the (Oedipal) irreducibility of myth from the science of psychoanalysis. For the acknowledgement of the radicality—the irreducibility—of the mythic element in psychoanalytic theory is by no means an abdication, in Lacan’s case as in Freud’s, of the commitment to psychoanalysis as science. “It may perhaps seem to you,” writes Freud, “as though our theories are a kind of mythology and, in the present case, not even an agreeable one”:

But does not every science come in the end to a kind of mythology like this? Cannot the same be said of today’s physics?

(XXII, 211)

In following Freud’s mythical and scientific path, Lacan’s interrogation, as opposed to Freud’s, concerns, here again, not the theory but the practice. Can the practice of psychoanalysis have a scientific claim? Does the practice work (and if so, how?), out of a reference to a truth which is of the order of a science, which can be accountable by science? Lacan replies in the affirmative. But his answer is, as usual, paradoxical and challenging in the way it (analytically) displaces our expectation as to what a science is, and where the science of psychoanalysis would reside. If science is involved, suggests Lacan, in the practice of psychoanalysis, it is not because the analyst is scientific, but because the patient is, or can be. But the patient is not, as we would expect, the object of the science of psychoanalysis, but its subject. The (scientific) question of psychoanalysis thus becomes the question of the subject of a science.

To pose that the subject on whom we operate in psychoanalysis can be nothing other than the subject of science, may seem like a paradox.

(E 859)
The “subject of science” is a subject who can be defined by the structure of his “relation to truth as cause” (E 873). This (psychoanalytic) truth as cause (a cause that is at once material, formal, and efficacious) is, in Lacan’s conception, “the incidence of the signifier” (insofar as it has caused the subject’s unconscious). And this scientific cause is what the subject—the analysand—is after.

I would like to ask you, analysts, the question: yes or no, does the exercise of your profession have the meaning of affirming that the truth of neurotic suffering is—to have truth as its cause [to have a rational causality which, though symbolic, has both a reference to, and a bearing on, the Real]?

(E 870)

This is why it was important to promote before all else, and as a fact to be distinguished from the question of whether or not psychoanalysis is a science (whether or not its field is scientific),—this fact, precisely, that its praxis implicates no other subject than the subject of science.

(E 863)

Contrary to received opinion, Lacan’s preoccupation is not with theory per se (with games of “intellectualization”), but always, with his practice as a psychoanalytical clinician. He is, first and foremost, a practitioner; a practitioner who happens to be thinking—and rethinking—about what he is doing in his practice. His theory is nothing other than his training practice—his practice as an educator, as a training analyst—who introduces others to the pragmatic issues (questions) of the practice.

Now, this commitment to the practice of psychoanalysis as science, concomitant with the acknowledgement that psychoanalytic theory is fundamentally and radically composed of myth—that the knowledge, that is, which is theorized out of the practice cannot transgress its status as a narrative expropriating its secured possession as a knowledge—, has repercussions both in theory and in practice. It means that, to be truly scientific, the practice has to be conceived as antecedent to the knowledge: it has to be forgetful of the knowledge.

Science, if you look into it, has no memory. It forgets the peripeties out of which it has been born; it has, in other words, a dimension of truth which psychoanalysis puts into practice.

(E 869)

[To be a good psychoanalyst is to find oneself] in the heart of a concrete history where a dialogue is engaged, in a register where no sort of truth can be found in the form of a knowledge which is generalizable and always true. To give the right reply to an event insofar as it is significant is . . . to give a good interpretation. And to give a good interpretation at the right timing is to be a good analyst.

(S-II, 31)
Any operation in the field of analytic action is anterior to the constitution of knowledge, which does not preclude the fact that in operating in this field, we have constituted knowledge.

For this reason, the more we know, the greater the risks we run. Everything that you are taught in a form more or less pre-digested in the so-called institutes of psychoanalysis (sadistic, anal stages, etc...)—is of course very useful, especially for non-analysts. It would be stupid for a psychoanalyst systematically to neglect it, but he should know that this is not the dimension in which he operates.

(S-II, 30)

The peculiar scientific status of psychoanalytic practice is then such that psychoanalysis (as an individual advent and process) is always living and re-living the very moment of the birth of knowledge: the moment, that is, of the birth of science. Like Oedipus at the beginning of his mythical itinerary, psychoanalysis has no use for the Oedipus myth insofar as it has entered, through the oracles, the domain of public discourse. Like Oedipus, psychoanalysis has no use of a preconceived knowledge of the mythic story, no use for the story insofar as the story is, precisely, in advance, well known. In practice, there is no such thing as a specimen story. The very notion of a specimen story as applied to the reading or interpretation of another story is thus always a misreading, a mistake.

This mistake exists in every form of knowledge, insofar as knowledge is nothing other than the crystallization of symbolic activity which it forgets, once constituted. In every knowledge already constituted there is thus a dimension of error, which consists in the forgetting of the creative function of truth in its nascent form.

(S-II, 29)

Paradoxically enough, it is precisely insofar as it embodies its own forgetting that the Oedipus myth is constitutive of the science of psychoanalysis. And this science only takes itself complacently (non-problematically) to be a science when it in effect forgets the fictive, generative moment of its birth, when it forgets, in other words, that it owes its creativity—the production of its knowledge—to a myth. In this respect, psychoanalysis, which treats the Real by means of the symbolic, is not so different, moreover, from any other science (physics, for example). There is a fictive moment at the genesis of every science, a generative fiction (a hypothesis) at the foundation of every theory.

To borrow a metaphor from physics, one could say that the generative, fictive psychoanalytic myth is to the science of psychoanalysis what the Heisenberg principle is to contemporary physics: the element of mythic narrative is something like an uncertainty principle of psychoanalytic theory. It does not conflict with sci-
ence—it *generates it*—as long as it is not believed to be, erroneously, a *certainty principle*.

The question of science in psychoanalysis is, thus, for Lacan, not a question of cognition but a question of commitment. And the concomitant acknowledgement of the psychoanalytic myth is, on the other hand, not a question of complacency in myth, but a question of exigency in and beyond the myth.

Science is the drive to *go beyond*. The scientist's commitment is at once to acknowledge myth and to attempt to *go beyond the myth*. Only when this (mythical, narrative) movement of 'going beyond' stops, does science stop. Only when the myth is not acknowledged, is believed to be a science, does the myth prevail at the expense of science. It is precisely when we believe we are *beyond* the myth that we are (indulge in) fiction. There is no 'beyond' to myth—science is always, in one way or another, a new (generative) myth.

There is no *beyond* to the narrative movement of the myth. But the narrative movement of the myth is precisely that which always takes us—if we dare go with it—*beyond itself*.

“Many complain”, writes Kafka14, “that the words of the wise are always merely parables and of no use in daily life, which is the only life we have”:

> When the sage says, "go beyond," he does not mean that we should cross to some actual place, which we could do anyhow if the labor were worth it; he means some fabulous yonder, something unknown to us, something too that he cannot designate more precisely, and therefore, cannot help us here in the very least. All these parables really set out to say merely that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible, and we know that already. But the cares we have to struggle with every day: that is a different matter.

Concerning this a man once said: Why such reluctance? If you only followed the parables you yourselves would become parables and with that rid of all your daily cares.

Another said: I bet that is also a parable.

The first said: You have won.

The second said: But unfortunately only in parable.

The first said: No, in reality: in parable you have lost.15

NOTES


5 For lack of space, I had to skip here a detailed analysis of the first and second dimensions. This essay will therefore concentrate on the third dimension, trying to implicate the first two through the third.

6 The following abbreviations are here used to refer to Lacan's works:

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

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


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

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


9 Sophocles, Oedipus at Colonus, translated by David Grene, in Sophocles I, The Complete Greek Tragedies, ed. D. Grene and R. Lattimore (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press), Scene 2, p. 96. All subsequent quotations from Oedipus at Colonus will refer to this edition, by scene number followed by page number.

10 Cf. E 277-278, N 66-67: "Even when in fact it is represented by a single person, the paternal function concentrates in itself both imaginary and real relations, always more or less inadequate to the symbolic relation which constitutes it. It is in the name of the father that we must recognize the support of the symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of the law."
11 This insight was first suggested to me (in a course on the Oedipus myth which tried to come to grips with the present questions) by my student, Teddy Cohen, to whom I here address this purloined letter of my thanks.
13 Aboard the ship which transported him to the U.S. to give the “Clark lectures”, Freud, apparently, said to Jung (who reported it to Lacan): “They don’t know that we bring with us the Plague. . . .”
15 The present essay is (part of) a chapter from my forthcoming book, Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Culture: Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight.