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# Psychoanalysis and Hermeneutics

Sergio Benvenuto

It had been some time since Alcibiades realized that Socrates was following him without saying a word. But one day, before Alcibiades was going to speak to the Athenians in the *agora*, Socrates brought himself to speak to the beautiful man. The spell of silence broken, Alcibiades asked in his turn: "Why are you following me?" To this Socrates answered in his typical way, that is, suspended between amorous ingenuity and pedagogical petulance: "Because I love you. . . ."

In effect, Socrates knew that the young Alcibiades was a very ambitious man, one with a very high opinion of himself, who believed he could give good advice to the mighty Athenians. But Socrates here insinuated that Alcibiades needed him—specifically his love and his advice—in order to succeed. So Socrates proceeds to pin him down with a dialogue about what Alcibiades believes he knows, and about what he should know, as we read in Plato's dialogue *Alcibiades I*.

Here we see that Socrates is in love with Alcibiades' soul

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[Based on a lecture presented to the Ivy House Seminar at 4 November 1987, organized by the Middlesex Polytechnic (Faculty of Social Science – Psychoanalytic Study Group), London.]

(rather than his body) as he tries to show him that he does not know that he does not know, even though he thinks he is the wisest man among all the Athenians. "You think you know what is right for the Athenians, instead you do not know what is essential, that is, yourself."

In order to exercise one of those activities which Freud called "impossible," that is, to govern (the others are to educate and to psychoanalyze),<sup>1</sup> we need the help of the lover Socrates, insofar as he invites us to a necessary regression toward self-knowledge. This *regression* seems to be the preliminary work for one's own *progression* in the world. But the actualization of this delphic invitation will take place only 2000 years after Socrates, through what Freud will call *Uebertragung*, transference, the rather vicious passage through the love of the other. And let us leave this *of the*, i genitive form, with the ambiguity it offers between subjective meaning (the other loves the subject), and objective sense (it is the subject who loves the other).

To quote a passage from the dialogue in question:

*Socrates*: (. . .) If the [delphic] inscription suggested to the eye: "Look at yourself," in which way, and what could we think it would be suggesting? Would it be suggesting to look at something through which the eye would be able to look at itself?

*Alcibiades*: Certainly.

*Socr.*: Okay, let's investigate which object we can look at by seeing it and ourselves.

*Alc.*: It is clear . . . mirrors and similar objects.

*Socr.*: Correct. It is not there, though, also in the eye through which we can see, something of the same kind? . . . Have you noticed that when you look at somebody in the eyes you can see your own face in the eye of the person in front of you, like in a mirror, this we call 'pupil' [*kore*: literally, in Greek, *girl*] because it is almost an image of the person who looks at it?

*Alc.*: That is true.

*Socr.*: If, then, an eye looks at another eye and stares at the best part of the eye through which he can see, he will see itself.

*Alc.*: Of course.

*Socr.*: If, therefore, an eye wants to see itself, it has to stare at an eye, and more specifically, at that part of it in which the visual virtue is to be found; is not this what we call sight?

*Alc.*: Yes.

*Socr.*: So now, dear Alcibiades, must not the soul too, if it

wants to know itself, stare at a soul, and most of all, at that trait into which the soul's virtue is to be found, that is, knowledge? . . . This part of the soul is similar to the divine, and, if you stare at it, you learn to know all that is divine, the intellect (*noun*) and thought, and in this way you have the possibility to know yourself in the best way. (*Alcibiades I*, 133)

Let us translate this dialogue into contemporary language. Plato was indicating that self-knowledge, as a reflexive return to oneself, is not to be taken as the subject's knowledge of scientific and objective facts, like, for example, the modern neurophysiologist's knowledge of certain relationships between human cerebral anatomy, thoughts, and passions. Socratic knowledge seems rather to be a specular re-cognition, or *ac-knowledge-ment*, of oneself. It is thus not objective knowledge—or *-cognition*—but a subjective *re-cognition*<sup>2</sup> that Socrates recommends, as does most subsequent Western philosophical and religious thought.

## II

Psychoanalysis can be seen as the last modernist offspring of a maieutics which had its noble Western origins in Plato. It does not take into account the "scientific calculation [computation]"—according to Heidegger, and also to Wittgenstein, scientific knowledge is essentially linked to calculation<sup>3</sup>—of the subject-as-object-of-knowledge, e.g., as a knowable object, as the "girl" or the "boy" in the pupil. Rather, psychoanalysis elicits its reflexive, hermeneutic mirror (its pupil) in the re-cognition of one's own truth through the dialectic intervention of the analyst.

But this recognition entails an *ac-knowledgement* which is both spring and offspring and the *conditio sine qua non* of the maieutic elaboration: transference, and the transferential relationship. This acknowledgement is already evident at the end of the above dialogue when Alcibiades says:

We are about to exchange our parts, Socrates, I take on yours and you mine. This is because from now on there will not be a moment when I am not after you as if you were a child, and when you have not me around as if I were your tutor. (*Alcibiades I*, 135)

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Their parts are inverted in this ac-knowledge-ment like a [further] pupil-mirror: it is not the lover Socrates who shadows Alcibiades, like a father who takes care of his child, but Alcibiades who will *take care* of Socrates. In a peculiar sense, each becomes the *pupil* of the other in a dialectic which informs also the psychoanalytic *cure*.

### III

Of course this is also a condensation, and something is changed in the maieutic undertaking. Because we don't believe in what Nietzsche called "the socratic *ratio*," we don't believe anymore in an identification of the soul with the intellectual instance of *ratio*, reason, nor do we believe that to recognize truth means to accede to "the Beautiful and the Good" in ourselves. In the same way, psychoanalysis modifies (or complicates) the amorous intrigue between Socrates-analyst and Alcibiades-analysand in its talk of transference and countertransference.

Let us recall the famous story that has become the myth of origin of psychoanalysis: how Joseph Breuer (Freud's early friend and master, co-author of the *Studies on Hysteria* with him) fled to Venice with his wife in fear of his hysterical patient Anna O's love for him. Freud, of course, will not be frightened at this manifestation of the monster of transference, and will come to re-cognize its truth. As did Socrates, who although well known for loving beautiful young men, was not afraid to lie chastely the whole night, under the beautiful naked body, willingly offered to his master, of Alcibiades. Thus, like Socrates who does not love Alcibiades' body, but his soul, for the sake of which he makes himself a pupil (as a girl, *koré*) for Alcibiades' soul to recognize itself, so the analyst is not supposed to go to bed with his or her patients, nor even wink at his/her patient's wish to do so. The analyst's desire is supposed to be elsewhere; it consists in offering himself as a mirror—as a pupil, in the ocular sense—in front of which the subject can recognize the truth of his own desire. And this reflexion—in its double meaning of both mirroring and thinking—is the only ac-knowledgement the analyst can expect.

## IV

The linguist D. Tagliavini has shown<sup>4</sup> how, not only in Greek or in English, but also in languages as distant from each other as Swahili, Chinese, Lapp, or Samoan, the pupil of the eye is referred to by a metaphor which designates, depending on the language, "boy" or "girl." In Spanish we find "*nina (del ojo)*," in Italian "*pupilla*" from the Latin word, in Portuguese "*menina (do olho)*." In each case the reason would seem to be the same: the "boy" or "girl" is in fact the image of the one who is looking, reflected in the pupil of the other's eye. As it is naturally a small, reduced image, it will in some way be called "child." Thus it is a sort of trace in speech of what Lacan called "the mirror stage": the primary mirror of a human being is (in) the eye of the other.

We can thus sketch out the dialectic on subjectivity which Plato already (in *Alcibiades I*, and also in *Symposium*) tried to make use of: The subject only (ac)know(ledges) himself through alienation in the other, through imaginatively situating himself in that particular part of the other's body. The human being sees himself *where* the other sees him. What Freud called "narcissism" is a function already inscribed in the Other, in the Other's gaze: Narcissism is then love of oneself insofar as one is loved by the Other, insofar as one is the Other's pupil.

The Psychoanalytical "form of life" (to use Wittgenstein's expression, *Lebensform*) is therefore founded on the socratic-platonic idea of a "hermeneutic" practice that is a kind of knowledge based on *anamnesis*, on an interpretative recognition or acknowledgement. This acknowledgement consists in making sense of entanglements between different elements. The neurotic symptom, for example, consists of those knots in which the subject has lost its sense. The analyst's interpretative knowledge, therefore, surfaces once it has been able to make one recognize something of himself (in being able to *sapere far riconoscere*, as one would say in Italian, or to *savoir faire reconnaitre*, as one would say better in French).

When I state that the analyst hermeneutically acknowledges by allowing the subject to recognize meaning in his symptoms, I am using the term *acknowledgement* with all its ambiguity. Just as a father legally recognizes an illegitimate child in a double recognition (on the one hand *he admits to* a real paternal relationship, and on the other he symbolically includes him within his name, his descent), the symbolic inclusion is essentially arbitrary. As

when, by adopting a child, even though you are not his biological father, you recognize him as your own. The psychoanalytic acknowledgement/re-cognition moves always between these two poles of meaning. And like the legal recognition of fatherhood, analytical work also oscillates between a *truth* and an *inclusion*: it both asserts the truth or unconscious desire, and it works a symbolic inclusion of the subject into its "analytical function" through the analytical bond.

## V

It has been objected that the kind of reconstruction I attempt here is out-of-date, given Lacan's later thought. According to one objection, the emergence of the subject S—the barred subject—is correlative to Lacan's abandoning of the concept of recognition. Thus according to this later Lacan, desire isn't to be recognized but interpreted. The earlier notion of the subject as a subject of recognition attributes an identity to it—yet identity is dropped by Lacan the moment he shifts the *aphanisis* (the lack of desire) on to the subject as subject of the signifying chain S, whereby the subject of the chain will no longer recognize itself (as did the classical subject of recognition).<sup>5</sup>

This objection takes for granted an essential difference between *interpretation* and *ac-knowledge-ment*. However, I am here attempting to show that "interpretation" is a variant of "recognition." Many in hermeneutic philosophy have focused on this point. Unfortunately, neither in English nor in Italian do we have the possibility of choosing between two words as in German, where *interpretation* can be translated either *Auslegung* or *Deutung*. In English there is only "interpretation."

A musician, a singer, a theatre director, *interprets* too. When a pianist puts on an "original" and "new" performance from a piece by Mozart, in what sense can we say that he effects a new *interpretation* of that piece? And in what sense is this interpretation different from the type of dream interpretation inaugurated by Freud? Is it essential for an interpretation to be verbal for it to be an interpretation? In the conversations about Freud he had with Rush Rhees, Wittgenstein interpreted the Freudian *Deutung* (interpretation) in a wider sense, similar to that of the musician who re-interprets a piece of music.<sup>6</sup> In this way a distinction is made by structuralist and hermeneutic thinkings between "sense" and "meaning."<sup>7</sup> Let us consider some examples.

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When we listen to a good interpretation of a piece of music, we may feel that the interpretation is right because it grasps some truth of the piece being played. This grasping is something like recognition, because we are talking about the recognition of a piece of truth which is hidden in that music. It is as if the performer had come up with an authentic possibility of that piece of music and it is this possibility that appears to be its truth.<sup>8</sup> Psychoanalytic interpretation, however, has this additional particular feature: that which has been recognized, in a dream, for instance, belongs to the subject itself.

What distinguishes the Freudian interpretation, for example of dreams, is the fact that when the subject comes to recognize the articulation of a wish in his/her dreams, this wish is not the wish of a god, nor that of any other entity—rather, it is something that belongs to the dreaming subject itself, and this is of the utmost importance. To interpret is, for Freud, to make the analysis and recognize the fact that a wish is signified behind a slip of the tongue or within a dream. But how can we justify the psychoanalytic assumption that this wish is the subject's own desire? Why can't psychoanalysis do without the category of *subject*? Certainly, there are various more or less behavioral forms of psychotherapy today which do not need to recur to a subject, whether called "ego," "Self," or "desire." Some of these forms of therapy, such as those inspired by Gregory Bateson's thought, or those inspired by Moreno's thought, work with language.<sup>9</sup> For example, they might give "paradoxical" prescriptions to their patients. What differentiates them from psychoanalysis, the Lacanian school included, is the fact they don't aim for recognition of desire as the subject's *own* desire. Such forms of psychotherapy don't interpret, recognize, or acknowledge: they merely prescribe. They function as messages within a system of communications rather than interpretations which recognize a piece of truth.

Undoubtedly Lacan's big contribution to psychoanalysis was to have overcome a clumsy and naive conception of psychoanalytic interpretation. He taught that one interprets without speaking: the interpretation takes place above all through scansion, emphases, and interruptions of the session. The Lacanian interpretation, then, coincides with a *style*. Interpretation is less and less an explicitly meaningful statement, and more like a musician's interpretation of a piece of music. Unlike Winnicott, who speaks about a "true self" and a "false self,"<sup>10</sup> and unlike Kohut,<sup>11</sup>



Lacan doesn't attribute any content to the subject or self. In this sense it is true that, according to some critics, the barred subject S is but a moment in the signifying chain and the very sign of a lack in the Other. But Lacan, to the extent that he is a Freudian, keeps his practice within the horizon of recognition, and this in opposition to any practice based on objective knowledge of a self as if it were a describable object.

## VI

I would liken Lacan's relation to psychoanalysis to Musil's novel *The Man without Qualities*. Is *The Man without Qualities* still a novel, or is it already a philosophical essay? Undoubtedly, Musil pushes the form of the novel to its limits: the classical form of Balzac and Dickens is dilated and deformed to the point of sliding into something different than a novel . . . into something more like an existential work of philosophy. And yet, *The Man without Qualities* remains a novel, in spite of everything. It would, then, be as absurd to reproach Musil for having written a novel, once again, *encore*, as it would be to reproach him for not having written a work of systematic philosophy!

In much the same way, we can say that Lacan pushed to its limits the Freudian ethics concerning the recognition of desire as subjectivity, although he remains a Freudian, namely, a psychoanalyst.

There are some Lacanians, at least in Italy, who go so far as to say that Lacan is only apparently a Freudian, that he goes beyond the Socratic-Freudian principle of recognition or acknowledgment of truth as truth about oneself. But I think this is a kind of wishful thinking: it manifests an impatience about overcoming psychoanalysis which I can appreciate, but which Lacan certainly did not have.

The starting point of hermeneutic philosophy was the problem of how to read and understand long-dead authors. This led to a central and striking problem: How is the dialogue with the other possible? But this question implies a paradox, a vicious circle, something like Heidegger's "hermeneutic circle." The paradox is that the other with whom we try to converse is defined by the fact that he is out of the conversation, otherwise, he would not be *an other*.

## VII

Now, it is true that psychoanalysts have often been hostile to the idea of analysis as a pure hermeneutic practice. Lacan himself said that the hermeneutic reconstruction was "a university's obscenity," perhaps in the wake of Ricoeur's essay on Freud.<sup>12</sup> Such mistrust, however, seems to originate in a misunderstanding, in the fact that hermeneutic reflection is identified with philosophical phenomenology, but the field of phenomenology does not exhaust the hermeneutic reflection. Hermeneutics today should be conceived of not as a particular philosophy, but rather as a *cura*, a care, a concern; it is to care for any act which entails interpretations, understanding, acknowledgement, reading, comprehension, and so forth.

The hermeneutic question is switched on every time one is confronted, not with natural facts which require causal scientific explanation, but rather with a fact of communication—a text or a message. As a corollary to this, there seems to be an irreducible splitting between the scientific calculation of nature and the hermeneutic practice of interpretation. But psychoanalysis has not yet renounced the demand of being considered scientific, probably because, if it insisted in moving into the field of hermeneutic practice, it would risk losing most of its imaginary respectability as a *science*.

Karl Popper and his followers have observed, not without good reasons, that psychoanalysis is not scientific because it is irrefutable. Lacan, also, in his late seminars, agreed with this point of view: psychoanalysis was certainly not a science in the modern sense. I often participate in debates in which analysts try to defend desperately the scientific validity of psychoanalytic theories against Popperians, mostly without much success. But it seems that many analysts would feel less respectable if Popper's theses were right, and they prefer to put their necks on the line in philosophical debates rather than serenely accept that their practice does not have the objective and calculable character of modern science.

Analysts tend to propose a *Bild*, that is, in German, an image, or a representation, of the subject, rather than agree with the idea that they are working on a *Bildung*, in German, a formation, an edification, in the sense of a re-education of the subject. Indeed, it hurts the professional dignity of analysts if you tell them they are re-educators and not men or women of science. Sometimes they

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liken themselves to explorers mapping out new lands and continents, like Columbus or Livingstone. Often they use special metaphors in order to describe the mind. Even the Freudian topology does not escape this tendency to topologize the subject. In fact, except for some important contributions by Lacan on the logic of time, it is rare to find analytic work which deals with the time of the unconscious. Although the unconscious is timeless, according to Freud, the analytic process takes place in time. The Cartesian assumption that the aim of objective knowledge resides in a space-object—that is, an extension—prevails tenaciously in modern analytical thinking.

Time, however, builds and destroys in silence, without producing *Bild*, and, therefore, without an image. Further, the dimension of time does not deal with identities but with differences. It is not by chance that hermeneutic reflection has invested a great deal of interest in historiographic work: The hermeneutic interest in the *differential* dimension of time prevails over the *identifying* dimension of space. The dimension of time does not constitute a so-called universal or eternal knowledge. Time is connected to the historical particularity of any *Bildung*, that is, specificity of any formation or edification.

We know that it is a fundamental rule of modern scientific knowledge that it be universally valid and beyond time. In fact, we could not state that Newton's laws of gravitation are valid for the universe for exactly one thousand years, and not valid for another thousand years. Scientific knowledge tends to abolish temporal particularities. That is why hermeneutic reflection is, in some sense, scandalous, for it aims at a knowledge which is not universally and eternally valid, but rather particular, an ephemeral knowledge which is on this side of the rhythms of time.

The Cartesian, scientific gaze is that of a subject placed outside the world and outside time, one who enunciates theories which aim at universal truths. The psychoanalytic gaze is instead hardly a gaze at all; it is rather a particular form of conversation in which the two subjects seek acknowledgement—in other words, it is a hermeneutic interpretation, one which operates on and aims at an acknowledgement.

An analysis is good not when it observes from outside the subjective world, but when it inhabits the human world in time. Unlike the scientific *Bild* and its specular image which has a flashing and instantaneous character, the psychoanalytic edification unfolds in time, like speech itself in its slowness. Freud said

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somewhere that psychoanalysis does not distinguish itself from magic in any essential way, but only as being "slow magic."<sup>13</sup>

## VIII

I would like to conclude with an anecdote from a seminar in Italy attended mainly by young people. The audience did not seem very convinced about my insistence on the fact that psychoanalysis is not a science. At a certain point I said, "The evidence that it is not a science is the fact that none of you is yet a great analyst."

What I meant to say was that: we know that in the calculative and objective sciences young people and neophytes are advantaged in competition and research, while in psychoanalysis an analyst usually only writes some good things after twenty years or more of analytical practice. This difference in the careers of analysts and scientists is not a secondary or casual phenomenon; indeed, it seems that the ethics of psychoanalysis exacts the slowness proper to a process of formation and edification, not only of the analysand but of the analyst too. And this is because the analyst's knowledge and the analysand's unconscious are not in the same relation to each other as the scientific gaze is to natural phenomena.

At the end of the seminar, one participant asked me: "If you are not happy with any theoretical tradition in psychoanalysis, which tradition or which school would you propose to us?" A rather "enlightened" request, for, in fact, it is the man of Enlightenment who believes he can choose his own tradition, his own history, his own language, and his own mental categories. But it is no more possible to choose a tradition or a history, than it is to choose one's own sex. Certainly more and more people get surgical sex changes: I would elect them the existential champions of Enlightenment. A wide part of hermeneutic philosophy insists on this central point: that it is not possible to get rid of one's own tradition and history. Wanting to get rid of them is an illusion. Plato had already seen this in his own way.

However, though the answer I gave to the audience was not "enlightened" in any standard way, it may have been consciously paradoxical: "The only way to find your tradition and the analytical school which suits you . . . is to follow faithfully the tradition to which you belong by chance, for the meantime. . . . Maybe only in this way will you find out *really* that you are dissatisfied with it."

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1. S. Freud, SE, vol. 19, p. 273; SE, vol. 23, p. 267.
  2. In French the word *reconnaissance* means both re-cognition and ac-knowledgement; in English, there are two different terms which we must make interact with each other.
  3. Cf. Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle, F. Waismann ed., Oxford, Blackwell, 1979.
  4. D. Tagliavini, "Di alcune denominazioni della pupilla," *Annali dell' Ist. Univ. di Napoli*, N.S., III, 1923, pp. 341-378.
  5. Cf. J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Vol. XX, Encore*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1974.
  6. L. Wittgenstein, "Conversations on Freud" in *Lectures & Conversation on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, C. Barrett ed., Univ. of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, pp. 41-52.
  7. In French structuralism, between *sens* and *signification*, or between *dénotation* and *connotation*. See R. Barthes, *Eléments de Sémiologie*, Paris, Ed. du Seuil, 1964.
  8. See L. Pareyson, *Estetica. Teoria della formativita*, Torino, Biblioteca di Filosofia, 1954.
  9. See G. Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, New York, Ballentine Books, 1972; P. Watzlawick, H. J. Beavin, D. D. Jackson, *Pragmatic of Human Communication*, New York, W. W. Norton, 1967.
  10. D. W. Winnicott, "Ego Distortion in Terms of True and False Self" in *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment*, London, Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1965. D. W. Winnicott, "La Schizophrénie infantile en termes d' adaptatio" in *Recherches*, December, Paris 1968.
  11. H. Kohut, *The Analysis of the Self*, Int. Univ. Press, Madison (Connecticut), 1974.
  12. P. Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, Yale Univ. Press, New Haven, 1970.
  13. See S. Freud, SE, vol. 20, p. 187.