

KNOWLEDGE AND TRUTH BEYOND OEDIPUS

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Concerning himself with the formations of the unconscious, his own and that of his patients, Freud, by means of the analytic technique, lays out a certain number of fundamental relations. He does this with reference to the Sophoclean myth of Œdipus, revealing that unconscious knowledge structures desire through the introduction of a prohibition. Following Lacan, we have become accustomed to reading these relations in terms of a combinatory. Lacan writes this combinatory in a much-reduced form, as the formula of the discourse of the master. We can understand the Œdipus complex and the discourse of the master as being synonymous with and correlative to the structure of the unconscious itself. We might say that the young Œdipus, supposing himself to be master of his own destiny, is thereby denied the knowledge of the familial story unconsciously determining his desire. And yet, it is only from having been denied knowledge that he is able to succeed his father to the throne. Accordingly, Lacan defines the discourse of the master as functioning precisely due to a split between the master signifier and knowledge.¹

$$\frac{S_1}{\$} \rightarrow \frac{S_2}{a}$$

Can the demand for analysis be considered as issuing from a 'desire to know'? Lacan casts doubt upon the notion of a desire to know for the reason that desire is itself born of repressed knowledge. Indeed, the analysand is afflicted by something that he does not want to know, something that has returned to haunt him, much like the plague issued by the Sphinx to decimate Œdipus' people. On first impression, such a paradox would appear to pose an impasse in the treatment. Yet, the analytic discourse shows that analysis allows knowledge to come to the place of truth. What kind of knowledge does psychoanalysis permit of and why should it arouse such horror?

$$\frac{\text{Desire}}{\text{Truth}} \rightarrow \frac{\text{Other}}{\text{Product}} \qquad \frac{a}{S_2} \rightarrow \frac{\$}{S_1}$$

The effect of the analytic discourse is to divide the analysand, to hystericise him, to impel him to interrogate his unconscious and thereby produce the signifiers that serve as his master. Let us consider in greater depth the relation between the hysteric — who we will consider in terms of suffering from a fundamental lack of a signifier — and the master. Essentially, it is the figure of the father that comes to the place of the master, from whom the hysteric has always hoped to receive a gift in the form of a signifier. Such a longing prevents her from fully leaving the Œdipus complex. The hysteric addresses the master with this complaint and seeks a symbolic response in the form of knowledge. However, despite the master's attempts to answer, the hysteric's complaint remains unresolved and she denounces him as master for, though he may know many things, none of them coincide with the truth she harbours. Knowledge about the truth is the wager she puts before the Other. The question is, faced with the master's failure, why does she refuse to address the question herself?

Lacan tells us, in *Seminar XVII*, that, 'No truth can be localised except in the field of enunciation.'² Truth therefore, cannot be reduced to the statement. For this reason, truth can only emerge in the 'half-saying', the 'half-saying' being an allusion to what is being said beyond the statement, which remains an enigma. Truth reveals itself in the difference between the subject's intended sense and what is produced in the locus of the Other. Clearly then, truth effects are loss effects, marked by castration. Here we could locate a cause of horror; speech incurs a loss. Were she to take the quest for knowledge as truth upon herself, the hysteric would have to face the horror of her lack, hence she leaves speech to the

Other and demands he insure that knowledge as truth does not succumb to this loss effect. Hence, Dora holds Freud's treatment in contempt. She is not receptive to Freud's allusions to a beyond of the statement, towards the truth of her own position in the affair. Instead, she seeks to rectify the truth regarding what she has been forced to undergo. She wants Freud to recognise that she has been wronged, that the rectification of the truth can only be achieved through securing the Other's recognition of the misdeeds carried out by the family members concerned.

Dora recounts to Freud her second dream. She tells him that in the dream she receives a letter from her mother saying that her father has died and that she is invited to attend the funeral. Freud discerns something distinctive regarding the vocabulary she uses to recount the dream. These terms have a technical and anatomical basis that can only have been derived from reading an encyclopaedia. What's more, he notes, the dream appears to be a description of the female genitals and a fantasy of defloration. Freud's interpretation produces a hitherto forgotten part of the dream: the dreamer went into her room and began reading a big book of encyclopaedic format that lay on her writing table. Lacan says that Dora finds a substitute for the symbolic father in this book, demonstrating that what Dora wants from her father is knowledge, but not just any knowledge, knowledge on the truth about sex. However, the scene by the lake demonstrates how things stand in relation to the truth about sex. In the actual encounter with a man, she fiercely rejects his advances, refusing to discover for herself the answer to the mystery when it does not present itself in symbolic form.

Freud's error, which he discovered too late, was in failing to identify the true object of Dora's desire, that it was not the father, but what the father has access to, the mystery of femininity, encapsulated in Frau K, in her 'adorable white body'. This line of inquiry would have led him towards a consideration of feminine sexuality and may even have enabled him to intervene in such a way that Dora might have continued the treatment, however he remains within the boundaries of the Œdipus complex. The question is, says Lacan, why should Freud choose to substitute the Œdipus myth for the knowledge garnered from the mouths of the hysterics? Our next question is to follow Lacan in asking why Freud made this fated substitution, precipitating Dora out of the treatment, when all the signs pointed elsewhere.

We might say that Freud's mistake in Dora's treatment betrays a 'not wanting to know' on his part, but about what? His use of the Œdipus complex leads him to tell Dora that the true object of her desire is Herr. K as substitute for the love of her father. He assumes this displaced love of the father is sufficient enough, whereas the truth, revealed by Lacan, is in the complaint against the father, that he has failed her. Lacan proposes to analyse the Œdipus myth as Freud's dream, putting the role Freud assigns to the father in question.

In all the Freudian myths, the father functions only to the extent that he is dead. In fact, the truth revealed to Œdipus is that the father is dead because he, Œdipus, had committed patricide. Lacan notes that the myth of the father's murder appears for the first time in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and that Freud himself tells us that it emerged from the death of his own father. In Chapter IV, Part G on 'Absurd Dreams', Freud gives as an example a dream dreamt by one of his patients: The patient had recently nursed his father through a long and painful illness that had eventually ended in the father's death. Subsequently, he had an apparently senseless dream: "His father was alive once more and was talking to him in his usual way, but (the remarkable thing was) he had really died, only he did not know it".³ This dream warrants the title of absurd for how can someone who is dead know they are dead?

In *Seminar XVII*, Lacan comments on this dream. He says that he had emphasised in its day that "it is indispensable for life that something irreducible does not know that I am dead", going on to distinguish the 'I' of 'I am dead' from the 'we' who are living. And, he continues, "I am dead in so far as I am destined to die — but in the name of this something that does not know it, I do not want to know it either".⁴ To understand his rather perplexing response we have to make a return to *Seminar VI, Desire and its Interpretation*, where, in 1958, Lacan had examined the dream in terms of statement and enunciation.

He takes as his guide the initial difficulty the child has in distinguishing the 'I' of the enunciation from the 'I' of the statement. This difficulty often results in statements such as the following, observed by the psychologist Binet: The child says 'I have three brothers, Paul, Ernest and me'. An error has been made in the counting. To avoid making this mistake the child has to subtract himself from the statement. He has to negate himself and then allow the signifier to step in his place. It is correlative to the murder of the Thing by the word; the word's capacity to name brings the death of the Thing and the birth of the subject, but a subject for whom the signifier marks the place where he is not, which means he is compelled to make an appeal to another signifier, and then another, and so on. The perpetual appeal to the signifier means one is always, by dint of this barring action, destined to die.

We have another rendering of negation but this time in relation to knowledge. The difficulty for the infant is that, from the very origin, his thoughts are structured by the discourse of the Other. Thus, he assumes that the Other knows all his thoughts. On making the discovery that the Other does not know anything about his thoughts, he discovers the domain of the secret, the 'non-said' whose mark is the negation. This is where he will lodge the 'I' of the enunciation, and locate his being as well as his desire, becoming a subject of the unconscious. The 'I' of the enunciation requires that the Other does not know, which accounts for why, in the dream, it appears in the statement as 'he didn't know.'

What did he not know? That he was dead. However, the statement 'he was dead' does not mean anything. The subject, once caught up in the signifying chain, has no means to imagine himself as not existing. Real death can be given an imaginary veil, but death itself is unthinkable; there is no representation of death in the Other, death is foreclosed in the Other. The Other can be considered as lacking the signifier of death, in symbolic terms he is castrated. Having established that there is no such thing as knowledge of death, we can perhaps now understand why Lacan says that "in the name of this something that does not know it, I do not want to know it either". However, we have also established that what the Other does not know is also the secret desire of the infant. Thus, Freud says, "this dream only becomes intelligible if, after the words, 'but he had really died' we insert 'in consequence of the dreamer's wish', and if we explain that what 'he did not know' was that the dreamer had had this wish".⁵ Two desires must coincide to produce a dream: one in the present — he hoped his father would die soon so as not to prolong his suffering — and the other with its roots in the past — an Œdipal wish to do away with the prohibiting father. Here a desire is unveiled, a desire that had been in operation from the very beginning: Freud's murder of the father. We can conclude that for Freud's dreamer the recent death of his father is impossible to reason, accounting for why the father returns in the subject's dream 'alive once more.' What the subject does not want to know above all is that the father is castrated, that he can produce neither the signifier that would circumscribe the *jouissance* of the woman nor that of death, and most of all, that it is due to this very fault of the father that he is a subject of desire. The horror that the emergence of this truth rouses is overcome by maintaining the Other's ignorance, as well as the subject's own, thereby allowing him to continue desiring, in secret, what is, by rights, the father's property, the mother. Lacan states that the Freudian myth is the equivalence of the dead father and *jouissance*, which is an absurdity for how can one be at once dead and *jouir*? He is the one who enjoys all the women and is thus an exception to his own law, the law of castration. The absurdity of the dream reported by Freud's patient can be understood as an attempt to represent the logical impossibility incarnated by the dead father. Indeed, Lacan considers such a logical impossibility a sign of the real. Beneath the mask of the loving father that the Œdipal myth would like to assign to him, the real father is nothing other than the castrating effect of the signifier, an effect of language, and is not to be confused with the father who works to provide for his family.

We can find this logical impossibility elaborated in Lacan's re-reading of Freud's myths in *Seminar XVII*. Lacan says that Œdipus gains access to his mother *not* through having killed his father but by having 'triumphed at the trial of truth.' Œdipus is presented with the Sphinx's enigma: "what has four legs in the morning, two in the afternoon and three in the evening?" His answer, 'It is man', reduces the enigma to the statement. He professes to know what man is, to recognise himself in the Other. This is tantamount to the position of the master who declares 'I know myself', proposing to know the whole truth, which, we have seen, is a logical impossibility. Such an assertion is enough to call down upon himself the agent of impossibility, the agent of castration, the real father; the suppressed truth strays only to return in the form of a plague decimating Œdipus' people. He is called for a second time to confront the enigma, this time discovering the terrible truth of his desire. His reaction is to gouge out his eyes. This castration, the tearing out of Œdipus' eyes, Lacan says, results not from having succeeded his father, but from having effaced the question of truth in taking the path of the master.

Whereas the real father is exposed as a structural operator, agent of castration, who is an exception to his own law, the truth of the master is that he is subject to this law. Indeed, the master does not cease to castrate himself in the attempt to assert his mastery, with the production of a part of *jouissance*. Although the hysteric may call down the agent of impossibility on the master, she acts as agent of impotence with regards to the production of her own knowledge in the place of truth and in so doing unwittingly attests to the fact that his castration is her privation. Lacan says that Dora finds herself doubly deprived of the phallus in the situation regarding the quadripartite structure of her father, Herr K and the supposed object of desire of both these men, that is Frau K. He says that "by virtue of this complex is the

mark of the identification with a *jouissance* in so far as it is that of the master".⁶ We could say that she desires 'not to know' as a *means* of *jouissance*, as a means of producing the *jouissance* of privation.

As mentioned previously, the effect of the analytic discourse is to hystericise the analysand, to impel him to interrogate his unconscious and thereby produce the signifiers that serve as his master. However, rather than perpetuating the master's mode of *jouissance*, the analytic discourse enables the hystericised analysand to trace out the paths by which the master signifiers caused a lack of being, a lack for which no suitable signifier can be found in the Other. Only then can the subject begin to construct true knowledge for, in being constructed around the impossible to say, it would be a knowledge that has the structure of truth, that is, it would be incomplete.

1. J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire XVII, L'envers de la psychanalyse*, 1969-70, Seuil, Paris, p. 105.
2. J. Lacan, *ibid.*, p. 70.
3. S. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, SE Vol 5 (PFL Vol. 4, p. 559).
4. J. Lacan, *ibid.*, p 143.
5. S. Freud, *ibid.*
6. J. Lacan, *ibid.*, p 110.

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