



Psychoanalysis and the Polis

Julia Kristeva; Margaret Waller

Critical Inquiry, Vol. 9, No. 1, The Politics of Interpretation. (Sep., 1982), pp. 77-92.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0093-1896%28198209%299%3A1%3C77%3APATP%3E2.0.CO%3B2-A>

Critical Inquiry is currently published by The University of Chicago Press.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/ucpress.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Psychoanalysis and the Polis

Julia Kristeva

Translated by Margaret Waller

Up until now philosophers have only interpreted the world. The point now is to change it.

—KARL MARX and FRIEDRICH ENGELS, *Theses on Feuerbach*

The delusions [*Wahnbildungen*] of patients appear to me to be the equivalents of the [interpretive] constructions which we build up in the course of an analytic treatment—attempts at explanation and cure.

—SIGMUND FREUD, “Constructions in Analysis”

The essays in this volume convince me of something which, until now, was only a hypothesis of mine. Academic discourse, and perhaps American university discourse in particular, possesses an extraordinary ability to absorb, digest, and neutralize all of the key, radical, or dramatic moments of thought, particularly, a fortiori, of contemporary thought. Marxism in the United States, though marginalized, remains deafly dominant and exercises a fascination that we have not seen in Europe since the Russian *Proletkult* of the 1930s. Post-Heideggerian “deconstructivism,” though esoteric, is welcomed in the United States as an antidote to analytic philosophy or, rather, as a way to valorize, through contrast, that philosophy. Only one theoretical breakthrough seems consistently to *mobilize* resistances, rejections, and deafness: psychoanalysis—not as the “plague” allowed by Freud to implant itself in

Translator's note.—I would like to thank Domna Stanton and Alice Jardine for their help on an earlier version of this translation.

Critical Inquiry 9 (September 1982)

© 1982 by The University of Chicago. 0093-1896/82/0901-0006\$01.00. All rights reserved.

America as a “commerce in couches” but rather as that which, with Freud and after him, has led the psychoanalytic decentering of the speaking subject to the very foundations of language. It is this latter direction that I will be exploring here, with no other hope than to awaken the resistances and, perhaps, the attention of a concerned few, after the event (*après coup*).

For I have the impression that the “professionalism” discussed throughout the “Politics of Interpretation” conference is never as strong as when professionals denounce it. In fact, the same preanalytic rationality unites them all, “conservatives” and “revolutionaries”—in all cases, jealous guardians of their academic “chairs” whose very existence, I am sure, is thrown into question and put into jeopardy by psychoanalytic discourse. I would therefore schematically summarize what is to follow in this way:

1. There are political implications inherent in the act of interpretation itself, whatever meaning that interpretation bestows. What is the meaning, interest, and benefit of the interpretive position itself, a position from which I wish to give meaning to an enigma? To give a political meaning to something is perhaps only the ultimate consequence of the epistemological attitude which consists, simply, of the desire *to give meaning*. This attitude is not innocent but, rather, is rooted in the speaking subject’s need to reassure himself of his image and his identity faced with an object. Political interpretation is thus the apogee of the obsessive quest for A Meaning.

2. The psychoanalytic intervention within Western knowledge has a fundamentally deceptive effect. Psychoanalysis, critical and dissolvent, cuts through political illusions, fantasies, and beliefs to the extent that they consist in providing only one meaning, an uncriticizable ultimate Meaning, to human behavior. If such a situation can lead to despair within the polis, we must not forget that it is also a source of lucidity and ethics. The psychoanalytic intervention is, from this point of view, a counterweight, an antidote, to political discourse which, without it, is free to become our modern religion: the final explanation.

3. The political interpretations of our century have produced two powerful and totalitarian results: fascism and Stalinism. Parallel to the socioeconomic reasons for these phenomena, there exists as well another, more intrinsic reason: the simple desire to give a meaning, to

Julia Kristeva, professor of linguistics at the University of Paris VII and a regular visiting professor at Columbia University, is the author of *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* and *About Chinese Women*. **Margaret Waller**, a doctoral candidate in French at Columbia University, is currently translating Kristeva’s *Revolution du langage poétique*.

explain, to provide the answer, to interpret. In that context I will briefly discuss Louis Ferdinand Céline's texts insofar as the ideological interpretations given by him are an example of political delirium in avant-garde writing.

I would say that interpretation as an epistemological and ethical attitude began with the Stoics. In other words, it should not be confused with *theory* in the Platonic sense, which assumes a prior knowledge of the ideal Forms to which all action or creation is subordinate. Man, says Epictetus, is "born to contemplate God and his works, and not only to contemplate them but also to interpret them [kai ou monon teatin, ala kai exegetin auton]." "To interpret" in this context, and I think always, means "to make a connection." Thus the birth of interpretation is considered the birth of semiology, since the semiological sciences relate a sign (an event-sign) to a signified in order to *act* accordingly, consistently, consequently.¹

Much has been made of the circularity of this connection which, throughout the history of interpretive disciplines up to hermeneutics, consists in enclosing the enigmatic (interpretable) object within the interpretive theory's preexistent system. Instead of creating an object, however, this process merely produces what the interpretive theory had preselected as an object within the enclosure of its own system. Thus it seems that one does not interpret something outside theory but rather that theory harbors its object within its own logic. Theory merely projects that object onto a theoretical place at a distance, outside its grasp, thereby eliciting the very possibility of interrogation (Heidegger's *Sachverhalt*).

We could argue at length about whether interpretation is a circle or a spiral: in other words, whether the interpretable object it assigns itself is simply constituted by the interpretation's own logic or whether it is recreated, enriched, and thus raised to a higher level of knowledge through the unfolding of interpretive discourse. Prestigious work in philosophy and logic is engaged in this investigation. I will not pursue it here. Such a question, finally, seems to me closer to a Platonic idea of interpretation (i.e., theorization) than it does to the true innovation of the Stoics' undertaking. This innovation is the reduction, indeed the elimination, of the distance between theory and action as well as between model and copy. What permits this elimination of the distance between nature (which the Stoics considered interpretable) and the interpreter is the extraordinary opening of the field of subjectivity. The person who does the interpretation, the subject who makes the connection between the sign and the signified, is the Stoic sage displaying, on the one hand,

1. See Victor Goldschmidt, *Le Système stoïcien et l'idée de temps* (Paris, 1953).

the extraordinary architectonics of his *will* and, on the other, his mastery of *time* (both momentary and infinite).

I merely want to allude to this Stoic notion of the primordial interdependence of *interpretation*, subjective *will*, and mastery of *time*. For my own interest is in contemporary thought which has rediscovered, in its own way, that even if interpretation does no more than establish a simple logical connection, it is nevertheless played out on the scene of speaking subjectivity and the moment of speech. Two great intellectual ventures of our time, those of Marx and Freud, have broken through the hermeneutic tautology to make of it a *revolution* in one instance and, in the other, a *cure*. We must recognize that all contemporary political thought which does not deal with technocratic administration—although technocratic purity is perhaps only a dream—uses interpretation in Marx's and Freud's sense: as transformation and as cure. Whatever *object* one selects (a patient's discourse, a literary or journalistic text, or certain sociopolitical behavior), its interpretation reaches its full power, so as to tip the object toward the *unknown* of the interpretive theory or, more simply, toward the theory's *intentions*, only when the interpreter *confronts* the interpretable object.

It is within this field of confrontation between the object and the subject of interpretation that I want to pursue my investigation. I assume that at its resolution there are two major outcomes. First, the object may succumb to the interpretive intentions of the interpreter, and then we have the whole range of domination from suggestion to propaganda to revolution. Or second, the object may reveal to the interpreter the unknown of his theory and permit the constitution of a new theory. Discourse in this case is renewed; it can begin again: it forms a new object and a new interpretation in this reciprocal transference.

Before going any further, however, I would like to suggest that another path, posthermeneutic and perhaps even postinterpretive, opens up for us within the lucidity of contemporary discourse. Not satisfied to stay within the interpretive place which is, essentially, that of the Stoic sage, the contemporary interpreter renounces the game of *indebtedness*, *proximity*, and *presence* hidden within the connotations of the concept of interpretation. (*Interpretare* means "to be mutually indebted"; *prêt*: from popular Latin *praestus*, from the classical adverb *praesto*, meaning "close at hand," "nearby"; *praesto esse*: "to be present, attend"; *praestare*: "to furnish, to present [as an object, e.g., money].") The modern interpreter avoids the presentness of subjects to themselves and to things. For in this presentness a strange object appears to speaking subjects, a kind of currency they grant themselves—interpretation—to make certain that they are really there, close by, within reach. Breaking out of the enclosure of the presentness of meaning, the *new* "interpreter" no longer interprets: he speaks, he "associates," because there is no longer an object to interpret; there is, instead, the setting off of semantic, logi-

cal, phantasmatic, and indeterminable sequences. As a result, a fiction, an uncentered discourse, a subjective polytopia come about, canceling the metalinguistic status of the discourses currently governing the post-analytic fate of interpretation.

The Freudian position on interpretation has the immense advantage of being midway between a classic interpretive attitude—that of providing meaning through the connection of two terms from a stable place and theory—and the questioning of the subjective and theoretical stability of the interpretant which, in the act of interpretation itself, establishes the theory and the interpreter himself as interpretable objects. The dimension of *desire*, appearing for the first time in the citadel of interpretive will, steals the platform from the Stoic sage, but at the same time it opens up time, suspends Stoic suicide, and confers not only an interpretive power but also a transforming power to these new, unpredictable signifying effects which must be called *an imaginary*. I would suggest that the wise interpreter give way to delirium so that, out of his desire, the imaginary may join interpretive closure, thus producing a perpetual interpretive creative force.

1. *What Is Delirium?*

Delirium is a discourse which has supposedly strayed from a presumed reality. The speaking subject is presumed to have known an object, a relationship, an experience that he is henceforth incapable of reconstituting accurately. Why? Because the knowing subject is also a *desiring* subject, and the paths of desire ensnarl the paths of knowledge.

Repressed desire pushes against the repression barrier in order to impose its contents on consciousness. Yet the resistance offered by consciousness, on the one hand, and the pressure of desire, on the other, leads to a displacement and deformation of that which otherwise could be reconstituted unaltered. This dynamic of delirium recalls the constitution of the dream or the phantasm. Two of its most important moments are especially noteworthy here.

First, we normally assume the opposite of delirium to be an objective reality, objectively perceptible and objectively knowable, as if the speaking subject were only a simple knowing subject. Yet we must admit that, given the cleavage of the subject (conscious/unconscious) and given that the subject is also a subject of desire, perceptual and knowing apprehension of the original object is only a theoretical, albeit undoubtedly indispensable, hypothesis. More importantly, the system Freud calls perception-knowledge (subsequently an object of interpretation or delirium) is always already marked by a *lack*: for it shelters within its very being the nonsignifiable, the nonsymbolized. This “minus factor,” by which, even in perception-knowledge, the subject signifies himself as

subject of the desire of the Other, is what provokes, through its insistence on acceding to further significations, those deformations and displacements which characterize delirium. Within the nucleus of delirious construction, we must retain this hollow, this void, this “minus 1,” as the instinctual drive’s insistence, as the unsymbolizable condition of the desire to speak and to know.

Yet delirium holds; it asserts itself to the point of procuring for the subject both *jouissance* and stability which, without that adhesive of delirium, would disintegrate rapidly into a somatic symptom, indeed, into the unleashing of the death drive. It can do so, however, only because the discourse of delirium “owes its convincing power to the element of historical truth which it inserts in the place of the rejected reality.”² In other words, delirium masks reality or spares itself from a reality while at the same time saying a truth about it. More true? Less true? Does delirium know a truth which is true in a different way than objective reality because it speaks a certain subjective truth, instead of a presumed objective truth? Because it presents the state of the subject’s desire? This “mad truth” (*folle vérité*) of delirium is not evoked here to introduce some kind of relativism or epistemological skepticism.³ I am insisting on the part played by truth in delirium to indicate, rather, that since the displacement and deformation peculiar to delirium are moved by desire, they are not foreign to the passion for knowledge, that is, the subject’s subjugation to the desire to know. Desire and the desire to know are not strangers to each other, up to a certain point. What is that point?

Desire, the discourse of desire, moves toward its object through a connection, by displacement and deformation. The discourse of desire becomes a discourse of delirium when it forecloses its object, which is always already marked by that “minus factor” mentioned earlier, and when it establishes itself as the complete locus of *jouissance* (full and without exteriority). In other words, no other exists, no object survives in its irreducible alterity. On the contrary, he who speaks, Daniel Schreber, for example, identifies himself with the very place of alterity, he merges with the Other, experiencing *jouissance* in and through the place of otherness. Thus in delirium the subject himself is so to speak the Phallus, which implies that he has obliterated the primordial object of desire—the mother—either because he has foreclosed the mother, whom he finds lacking, or because he has submerged himself in her, exaggerating the totality thus formed, as if it were the Phallus. Delirium’s structure thus constitutes the foreclosure of the paternal func-

2. Sigmund Freud, “Constructions in Analysis,” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London, 1953–74), 23:268.

3. See in my *Folle vérité* (Paris, 1979) the texts presented in my seminar at l’Hôpital de la Cité Universitaire, Service de psychiatrie.

tion because of the place it reserves for the maternal—but also feminine—object which serves to exclude, moreover, any other consideration of objectality.

By contrast, if it is true that the discourse of knowledge leads its enigmatic preobject, that which solicits interpretation—its *Sachverhalt*—inside its own circle and as such brings about a certain hesitation of objectness, it does not take itself for the Phallus but rather places the Phallus outside itself in what is to be known: object, nature, destiny. That is why the person through whom knowledge comes about is not mad, but (as the Stoics have indicated) he is (subject to) death. The time of accurate interpretation, that is, an interpretation in accordance with destiny (or the Other's Phallus), is a moment that includes and completes eternity; interpretation is consequently both happiness and death of time and of the subject: suicide. The transformation of sexual desire into the desire to know an object deprives the subject of this desire and abandons him or reveals him as subject to death. Interpretation, in its felicitous accuracy, expurgating passion and desire, reveals the interpreter as master of his will but at the same time as slave of death. Stoicism is, and I'll return to this point, the last great pagan ideology, tributary of nature as mother, raised to the phallic rank of Destiny to be interpreted.

2. Analytic Interpretation

Like the delirious subject, the psychoanalyst builds, by way of interpretation, a construction which is true only if it triggers other associations on the part of the analysand, thus expanding the boundaries of the analyzable. In other words, this analytic interpretation is only, in the best of cases, *partially true*, and its truth, even though it operates with the past, is demonstrable only by its *effects in the present*.

In a strictly Stoic sense, analytic interpretation aims to correspond to a (repressed) event or sign in order to *act*. In the same sense, it is a *connection* between disparate terms of the patient's discourse, thereby reestablishing the causes and effects of desire; but it is especially a connection of the signifiers peculiar to the analyst with those of the analysand. This second circulation, dependent on the analyst's desire and operative only with him, departs from interpretive mastery and opens the field to suggestion as well as to projection and indeterminable drifts. In this way, the analyst approaches the vertigo of delirium and, with it, the phallic *jouissance* of a subject subsumed in the dyadic, narcissistic construction of a discourse in which the *Same* mistakes itself for the *Other*. It is, however, only by detaching himself from such a vertigo that the analyst derives both his *jouissance* and his efficacy.

Thus far, we have seen that analytic interpretation resembles delirium in that it introduces desire into discourse. It does so by giving narcissistic satisfaction to the subject (the analyst or the analysand), who, at the risk of foreclosing any true object, derives phallic jubilation from being the author/actor of a connection that leaves room for desire or for death in discourse.

Yet the analytic position also has counterweights that make delirium work on behalf of analytic truth. The most obvious, the most often cited, of these is the *suspension* of interpretation: silence as frustration of meaning reveals the ex-centricity of desire with regard to meaning. Madness/meaninglessness *exists*—this is what interpretive silence suggests. Second, the analyst, constantly tracking his own desire, never stops analyzing not only his patients' discourse but also his own attitude toward it which is his own countertransference. He is not fixed in the position of the classical interpreter, who interprets by virtue of stable meanings derived from a solid system or morality or who at least tries to restrict the range of his delirium through a stable theoretical counterweight. This is not to say that analytic theory does not exist but rather that, all things considered, its consistency is rudimentary when compared to the countertransference operation which is always specific and which sets the interpretive machine in motion differently every time. If I know that my desire can make me delirious in my interpretive constructions, my return to this delirium allows me to dissolve its meaning, to displace by one or more notches the quest for meaning which I suppose to be *one* and *one only* but which I can *only* indefinitely approach. *There is meaning, and I am supposed to know it to the extent that it escapes me.*

Finally, there is what I will call the *unnameable*: that which is necessarily enclosed in every questionable, interpretable, enigmatic object. The analyst does not exclude the unnameable. He knows that every interpretation will float over that shadowy point which Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams* calls the dreams' "umbilical." The analyst knows that delirium, in its phallic ambition, consists precisely in the belief that light can rule everywhere, without a shadow. Yet the analyst can sight and hear the unnameable, which he preserves as the condition of interpretation, *only if he sees it as a phantasm*. As origin and condition of the interpretable, the unnameable is, perhaps, the primordial phantasm. What analysis reveals is that the human being does not speak and that, a fortiori, he does not interpret *without* the phantasm of a return to the origin, without the hypothesis of an unnameable, of a *Sachverhalt*.

Furthermore, analysis reveals that interpretive speech, like all speech which is concerned with an object, is acted upon by the desire to return to the archaic mother who is resistant to meaning. Interpretive speech does this so as to place the archaic mother within the order of language—where the subject of desire, insofar as he is a speaking subject, is immediately displaced and yet, henceforth, situated. The return to the

unnameable mother may take the form of narcissistic and masochistic delirium, in which the subject merely confronts an idealized petrification of himself in the form of an interpretive Verb, interpretation becoming, in this case, Everything, subject and object. This is what analytic interpretation confronts, undergoes, and, also, displaces.

For, in short, the analyst-interpreter or the interpreter turned analyst derives the originality of his position from his capacity for displacement, from his mobility, from his polytopia. From past to present, from frustration to desire, from the parameter of pleasure to the parameter of death, and so on—he dazes the analysand with the unexpectedness of his interpretation; even so, however, the unexpectedness of the analysis is in any case sustained by a constant: the desire for the Other. (“If you want me to interpret, you are bound in my desire.”)

Since Edward Glover’s *Technique of Psychoanalysis* (1928), a highly regarded work in its time, analytic theory has appreciably refined its notion of interpretation.⁴ The criteria for sound interpretation may undoubtedly vary: “good adaptation” of the analysand, “progress,” appearance of remote childhood memories, encounter with the analyst’s transference, and so on. Or criteria for a sound interpretation may even disappear, leaving only the need for a temporary sanction (which may be on the order of the parameters already outlined) within an essentially open interpretive process. In this process, *one* meaning and *one meaning alone* is always specifiable for a particular moment of transference; but, given the vast storehouse of the unknown from which analytic interpretation proceeds, this meaning must be transformed.

If it seems that analytic interpretation, like all interpretation in the strong sense of the word, is therefore an action, can we say that this interpretation aims to change the analysand? Two extreme practices exist. In one, the analysis suggests interpretations; in the other, it assumes a purist attitude: by refusing to interpret, the analysis leaves the patient, faced with the absolute silence of the interpreter, dependent on his own capacity for listening, interpreting, and eventually changing. Faced with these excesses, one could argue that in the vast majority of analyses a psychotherapeutic moment occurs which consists in compensating for previous traumatic situations and allowing the analysand to construct another transference, another meaning of his relationship to the Other, the analyst. In the analytic interpretation, however, such a therapeutic moment has, ultimately, no other function than to effect a transference which would otherwise remain doubtful. Only from that moment does true analytic work (i.e., *dissolving*) begin. Basically, this work involves removing obvious, immediate, realistic meaning from discourse so that the meaninglessness/madness of desire may appear and,

4. See esp. Jacques Lacan, “De l’interprétation au transfert,” *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan*, vol. 11, *Les Quatre Concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse* (Paris, 1973), pp. 221 ff.

beyond that, so that every phantasm is revealed as an attempt to return to the unnameable.

I interpret, the analyst seems to say, because Meaning exists. But my interpretation is infinite because Meaning is made infinite by desire. I am not therefore a dead subject, a wise interpreter, happy and self-annihilated in a uniform totality. I am subject to Meaning, a non-Total Meaning, which escapes me.

Analytic interpretation finally leads the analyst to a fundamental problem which I believe underlies all theory and practice of interpretation: the heterogeneous in meaning, the limitation of meaning, its incompleteness. Psychoanalysis, the only modern interpretive theory to hypothesize the heterogeneous in meaning, nevertheless makes that heterogeneity so interdependent with language and thought as to be its very condition, indeed, its driving force. Furthermore, psychoanalysis gives heterogeneity an operative and analyzable status by designating it as sexual desire and/or as death wish.

3. Can Political Interpretation Be True?

The efficacy of interpretation is a function of its transference truth: this is what political man learns from the analyst, or in any case shares with him. Consider, for example, those political discourses which are said to reflect the desires of a social group or even of large masses. There is always a moment in history when those discourses obtain a general consensus not so much because they interpret the situation correctly (i.e., in accordance with the exigencies of the moment and developments dictated by the needs of the majority) but rather because they correspond to the essentially utopian desires of that majority. Such political interpretation interprets *desires*; even if it lacks reality, it contains the truth of desires. It is, for that very reason, utopian and ideological.

Yet, as in analysis, such an interpretation can be a powerful factor in the mobilization of energies that can lead social groups and masses beyond a sadomasochistic asceticism to change real conditions. Such a mobilizing interpretation can be called revolution or demagoguery. By contrast, a more objective, neutral, and technocratic interpretation would only solidify or very slowly modify the real conditions.

All political discourse that wants to be and is efficacious shares that dynamic. Unlike the analytic dynamic, however, the dynamic of political interpretation does not lead its subjects to an elucidation of their own (and its own) truth. For, as I pointed out earlier, analytic interpretation uses desire and transference, but only to lead the subject, faced with the erosion of meaning, to the economy of his own speaking. It does so by deflating the subject's phantasms and by showing that all phantasms, like

any attempt to give meaning, come from the phallic *jouissance* obtained by usurping that unnameable object, that *Sachverhalt*, which is the archaic mother.

Of course, no political discourse can pass into nonmeaning. Its goal, Marx stated explicitly, is to reach the goal of interpretation: interpreting the world in order to transform it according to our needs and desires. Now, from the position of the post-Freudian, post-phenomenological analyst—a position which is really an untenable locus of rationality, a close proximity of meaning and nonmeaning—it is clear that there is no World (or that the World is not all there is) and that *to transform* it is only one of the circles of the interpretation—be it Marxist—which refuses to perceive that it winds around a *void*.

Given this constant factor of the human psyche confirmed by the semiotician and the psychoanalyst when they analyze that ordeal of discourse which is the discourse of delirium, what becomes of interpretive discourse? Indeed, what happens to interpretive discourse in view of the void which is integral to meaning and which we find, for example, in the “arbitrariness of the sign” (the unmotivated relation between signifier and signified in Saussure), in the “mirror stage” (where the subject perceives his own image as essentially split, foreign, other), or in the various forms of psychic alienation? Clearly, interpretive discourse cannot be merely a hermeneutics or a politics. Different variants of sacred discourse assume the function of interpretation at this point.

Our cultural orb is centered around the axiom that “the Word became flesh.” Two thousand years after a tireless exploration of the comings and goings between discourse and the object to be named or interpreted, an object which is the solicitor of interrogation, we have finally achieved a discourse on discourse, an interpretation of interpretation. For the psychoanalyst, this vertigo in abstraction is, nevertheless, a means of protecting us from a masochistic and jubilatory fall into nature, into the full and pagan mother, a fall which is a tempting and crushing enigma for anyone who has not gained some distance from it with the help of an interpretive device. However, and this is the second step post-phenomenological analytic rationality has taken, we have also perceived the incompleteness of interpretation itself, the incompleteness characteristic of all language, sign, discourse. This perception prevents the closure of our interpretation as a self-sufficient totality, which resembles delirium, and at the same time this perception of interpretation constitutes the true life of interpretations (in the plural).

4. *Literature as Interpretation: The Text*

Philosophical interpretation as well as literary criticism therefore and henceforth both have a tendency to be written as *texts*. They openly

assume their status as fiction without, however, abandoning their goal of stating One meaning, The True Meaning, of the discourse they interpret.

The fate of interpretation has allowed it to leave behind the protective enclosure of a metalanguage and to approach the imaginary, without necessarily confusing the two. I would now like to evoke some specifics and some dangers of openly fictional interpretation in literary discourse itself. So as not to simplify the task, I will take as my example a modern French novelist, Louis Ferdinand Céline (1894–1961), whose popular and musical style represents the height of twentieth-century French literature and whose anti-Semitic and para-Nazi pamphlets reveal one of the blackest aspects of contemporary history.

I consider all fiction (poetic language or narrative) already an interpretation in the broad sense of the speaking subject's implication in a transposition (connection) of a presupposed object. If it is impossible to assign to a literary text a preexisting "objective reality," the critic (the interpreter) can nevertheless find the mark of the interpretive function of writing in the transformation which that writing inflicts on the language of everyday communication. In other words, *style* is the mark of interpretation in literature. To quote Céline, "I am not a man of ideas. I am a man of style. . . . This involves taking sentences, I was telling you, and unhinging them."⁵ Such an interpretive strategy is clearly an enunciative strategy, and, in Célinian language, it uses two fundamental techniques: *segmentation* of the sentence, characteristic of the first novels; and the more or less recuperable *syntactical ellipses* which appear in the late novels.

The peculiar segmentation of the Célinian phrase, which is considered colloquial, is a cutting up of the syntactic unit by the projected or rejected displacement of one of its components. As a result, the normally descending modulation of the phrasal melody becomes an intonation with two centers. Thus: "I had just discovered war in its entirety. . . . Have to be almost in front of it, like I was then, to really see it, the bitch, face on and in profile."⁶

An analysis of this utterance, not as a syntactic structure but as a *message* in the process of enunciation between a speaking subject and his addressee, would show that the aim of this ejection is to *thematize* the displaced element, which then acquires the status not merely of a theme but of an emphatic theme. "La vache" ("the bitch") is the vehicle for the primary information, the essential message which the speaker emphasizes. From this perspective, the ejected element is desyntacticized, but it

5. Louis Ferdinand Céline, "Louis Ferdinand Céline vous parle," *Oeuvres complètes*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1966–69), 2:934.

6. "Je venais de découvrir la guerre toute entière. . . . Faut être à peu près devant elle comme je l'étais à ce moment-là pour bien la voir, *la vache*, en face et de profil" (Céline, *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, *Oeuvres complètes*, 1:8).

is charged with supplementary semantic value, bearing the speaker's emotive attitude and his moral judgment. Thus, the ejection emphasizes the informative kernel at the expense of the syntactic structure and makes the logic of the message (theme/rheme, support/apport, topic/comment, presupposed/posed) dominate over the logic of syntax (verb-object); in other words, the logic of enunciation dominates over that of the enunciated. In fact, the terminal intonational contour of the rheme (along two modalities: assertive and interrogative) indicates the very point at which the modality of enunciation is most profoundly revealed. The notable preponderance of this contour with the bipartition theme/rheme in children's acquisition of syntax or in the emotive or relaxed speech of popular or everyday discourse is added proof that it is a *deeper* organizer of the utterance than syntactic structures.

This "binary shape" in Céline's first novels has been interpreted as an indication of his uncertainty about self-narration in front of the Other. Awareness of the Other's existence would be what determines the phenomena of recall and excessive clarity, which then produces segmentation. In this type of sentence, then, the speaking subject would occupy two places: that of his own identity (when he goes straight to the information, to the rheme) and that of objective expression, for the Other (when he goes back, recalls, clarifies). Given the prevalence of this type of construction in the first phases of children's acquisition of syntax, we can state that this binomial, which is both intonational and logical, coincides with a fundamental stage in the constitution of the speaking subject: his autonomization with respect to the Other, the constitution of his own identity.

To Freud's and René Spitz's insistence that "no" is the mark of man's access to the symbolic and the founding of a distinction between the pleasure principle and the reality principle, one could add that the "binarism" of the message (theme/rheme and vice versa) is another step, a fundamental step, in the symbolic integration of negativism, rejection, and the death drive. It is even a decisive step: with the binarism of the message and before the constitution of syntax, the subject not only differentiates pleasure from reality—a painful and ultimately impossible distinction—but he also distinguishes between the statements: "I say by presupposing" and "I say by making explicit," that is, "I say what matters to me" versus "I say to be clear" or even, "I say what I like" versus "I say for you, for us, so that we can understand each other." In this way, the binary message effects a slippage from the *I* as the pole of pleasure to the *you* as addressee and to the impersonal *one*, he, which is necessary to establish a true universal syntax. This is how the subject of enunciation is born. And it is in remembering this path that the subject rediscovers, if not his origin, at least his originality. The "spoken" writing of Céline achieves just such a remembering.

In addition, in Céline's last novels, *D'un château l'autre*, *Nord*, and

Rigodon, he repeatedly uses the famous “three dots” (suspension points) and the exclamations which sometimes indicate an ellipsis in the clause but serve more fundamentally to make the clause overflow into the larger whole of the message. This technique produces a kind of long syntactic period, covering a half-page, a full page, or more. In contrast to Proustian fluctuation, it avoids subordinations, is not given as a logical-syntactic unit, and proceeds by brief utterances: clauses pronounceable in one breath which cut, chop, and give rhythm. Laconism (nominal sentences), exclamations, and the predominance of intonation over syntax reecho (like segmentation but in another way) the archaic phases of the subject of enunciation. On the one hand, these techniques, because of the influx of nonmeaning, arouse the nonsemanticized emotion of the reader. On the other hand, they give an infrasyntactical, intonational inscription of that same emotion which transverses syntax but integrates the message (theme/rheme and subject-addressee).⁷

From this brief linguistico-stylistic discussion, I would like to stress the following: style is interpretation in the sense that it is a connection between the logic of utterance and the logic of enunciation, between syntax and message and their two corresponding subjective structures. The unobjectifiable, unnameable “object” which is thereby caught in the text is what Céline calls an *emotion*. “Drive,” and its most radical component, the death drive, is perhaps an even better term for it. “You know, in Scriptures, it is written: ‘In the beginning was the Word.’ No! In the beginning was emotion. The Word came afterwards to replace emotion as the trot replaced the gallop.”⁸ And again: “Slang is a language of hatred that knocks the reader over for you . . . annihilates him! . . . at your mercy! . . . he sits there like an ass.”⁹

It is as if Céline’s stylistic adventure were an aspect of the eternal return to a place which escapes naming and which can be named only if one plays on the whole register of language (syntax, but also message, intonation, etc.). This locus of emotion, of instinctual drive, of non-semanticized hatred, resistant to logico-syntactic naming, appears in Céline’s work, as in other great literary texts, as a locus of the abject. The abject, not yet object, is anterior to the distinction between subject and object in normative language. But the abject is also the nonobjectivity of the archaic mother, the locus of needs, of attraction and repulsion, from which an object of forbidden desire arises. And finally, abject can be understood in the sense of the horrible and fascinating abomination which is connoted in all cultures by the feminine or, more indirectly, by every partial object which is related to the state of abjection (in the sense of the nonseparation subject/object). It becomes what culture, the *sacred*,

7. For a lengthier discussion of Céline’s style and its interpretation, see my *Pouvoirs de l’horreur: Essai sur l’abjection* (Paris, 1980).

8. Céline, “Céline vous parle,” p. 933.

9. Céline, *Entretiens avec le professeur Y* (1955; Paris, 1976), p. 72.

must purge, separate, and banish so that it may establish itself as such in the universal logic of catharsis.

Is the abject, the ultimate object of style, the archetype of the *Sachverhalt*, of what solicits interpretation? Is it the archi-interpretable? This is, as I said earlier, something analytic interpretation can argue. Meaning, and the interpretation which both posits and lives off meaning, are sustained by that *elsewhere* which goes beyond them and which fiction, style (other variants of interpretation), never stops approaching—and dissolving.

For this is in fact the central issue in Céline as in the great writers of all times. By their themes (evil, idiocy, infamy, the feminine, etc.) and their styles, they immerse us in the abject (the unnameable, the *Sachverhalt*), not in order to name, reify, or objectify them once and for all but to dissolve them and to displace us. In what direction? Into the harmony of the Word and into the fundamental incompleteness of discourse constituted by a cleavage, a void: an effervescent and dangerous beauty, the fragile obverse of a radical nihilism that can only fade away in “those sparkling depths which [say] that nothing exists any more.”¹⁰

Yet this pulverization of the abject, the ultimate case of interpretation by style, remains fragile. Because it does not always satisfy desire, the writer is tempted to give one interpretation and one only to the outer limit of the nameable. The *Sachverhalt*, the abject, is then embodied in the figure of a maleficent agent, both feminine and phallic, miserable and all-powerful, victim and satrap, idiot and genius, bestial and wily. What once defied discourse now becomes the ultimate object of one and only one interpretation, the source and acme of a polymorphous *jouissance* in which the interpreter, this time in his delirium, is finally reunited with what denies, exceeds, and excites him. He blends into this abject and its feminine-maternal resonance which threatens identity itself. This interpretive delirium—writing’s weak moment—found in Céline the Jew as its privileged object in the context of Hitlerism. The historical and social causes of Céline’s anti-Semitism can be sought in monotheism, or, rather, in its denials, and in the history of France and the reality of the Second World War. His anti-Semitism also has a more subtle foundation, more intrinsically linked to the psychic instability of the writer and the speaking subject in general: it is the fascination with the wandering and elusive other, who attracts, repels, puts one literally beside oneself. This other, before being another subject, is an object of discourse, a nonobject, an abject. This abject awakens in the one who speaks archaic conflicts with his own improper objects, his abjects, at the edge of meaning, at the limits of the interpretable. And it arouses the paranoid rage to dominate those objects, to transform them, to exterminate them.

I do not presume to elucidate in this brief presentation the many

10. Céline, *Rigodon*, *Oeuvres complètes*, 2:927.

causes and aspects of Céline's anti-Semitism. A lengthier consideration of the subject can be found in my *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*. I have broached this difficult and complex subject here to indicate by a *paroxysm*, which we could take as a *hyperbole*, the dangerous paths of interpretive passion, fascinated by an enigma that is beyond discourse. For the psychoanalyst, it recalls a desiring indebtedness to the maternal continent.

I would like the above remarks to be taken both as a "free association" and as the consequence of a certain position. I would want them to be considered not only an epistemological discussion but also a personal involvement (need I say one of desire?) in the dramas of thought, personality, and contemporary politics. Such a vast theme ("the politics of interpretation") cannot help but involve a multiplicity of questions. If their conjunction in my paper seems chaotic, inelegant, and nonscientific to a positivist rationality, this conjunction is precisely what defines for me the originality and the difficulty of psychoanalytic interpretation. The task is not to make an interpretive summa in the name of a system of truths—for that attitude has always made interpretation a rather poor cousin of theology. The task is, instead, to record the *crisis* of modern interpretive systems without smoothing it over, to affirm that this crisis is inherent in the symbolic function itself, and to perceive as symptoms all constructions, including totalizing interpretation, which try to deny this crisis: to dissolve, to displace indefinitely, in Kafka's words, "temporarily and for a lifetime."

Perhaps nothing of the wise Stoic interpreter remains in the analyst except his function as *actor*: he accepts the text and puts all his effort and desire, his passion and personal virtuosity, into reciting it, while remaining indifferent to the events that he enacts. This "indifference," called "benevolent neutrality," is the modest toga with which we cover our interpretive desire. Yet by shedding it, by implicating ourselves, we bring to life, to meaning, the dead discourses of patients which summon us. The ambiguity of such an interpretive position is both untenable and pleasurable. Knowing this, knowing that he is constantly in abjection and in neutrality, in desire and in indifference, the analyst builds a strong ethics, not normative but directed, which no transcendence guarantees. That is where, it seems to me, the modern version of liberty is being played out, threatened as much by a single, total, and totalitarian Meaning as it is by delirium.