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PSYCHOANALYTIC INTERPRETATION - THROUGH A LACANIAN LENS¹

Alan Rowan

Introduction

Psychoanalysis privileges interpretation putting it at the very heart of its approach to treatment while most other psychological treatment approaches more or less actively avoid this. Instead they rely on giving advice, coaching, acquiring skills (especially so-called "self-management" or "self-regulation" ones), and correcting cognitive and reasoning errors and biases. If the "evidence based" outcomes from such treatments are widely exaggerated (Rowan, 2011), it is also clear that such approaches are not useless and obviously work for some people. Especially, it can be argued, in those cases where a subject does not want to question why they suffer as they do, but rather simply find some way to be rid of it.

However, in psychoanalysis something very different is going on and it is tied to the audacious claim by Freud that as humans we have an unconscious. With this postulation Freud created a scandal - one that continues to this day - as many have rejected, and still reject, the idea that there are intentional and motivational psychic processes taking place inside of us, of which we are not aware.

One reason for this is that any cherished notion of "rational man" is radically displaced, and we are confronted with the idea that

¹ A version of this paper was presented at an APPI public seminar held in Dublin on March 25, 2017 under the title, "Interpretation and What it Aims At."

we are far more irrational than we may like to think. In place of self-transparency, the idea that we know what we want, think or desire, Freud presents us with a view of ourselves whereby we are opaque to ourselves and may act contrary to our espoused wishes and intentions. In fact, and to put this in simple terms, it is as if we actually live in a world where a stranger can quite easily step into our shoes and moreover, act with a purpose that seems alien to us. For example, in a bungled action we break, lose or, put under threat something very important to us, or to give a different example, one finds oneself constantly choosing abusive and exploitive partners while insisting that this is exactly what one does not want. To quote Lacan (1975/1989), “[i]f there is something called the unconscious, it means that one doesn’t have to know what one is doing in order to do it” (p.9).

If it seems hard to accept this somewhat narcissistically wounding view of ourselves, there is abundant evidence that as humans we engage in all sorts of so-called self-defeating behaviours. Addictions of multiple types are one example, but we can also fail to carry out our plans, or simply bore ourselves in endless procrastination, even becoming deeply frustrated by not doing precisely what we want to do.

What needs to be stressed here is that as human beings we can do something quite extraordinary, namely, deceive ourselves. Moreover, this problematic was noted as far back as Aristotle who in his *Nicomachean Ethics* coined the term “akrasia” for it. Defined as “weakness of will,”² as not being in command of oneself, the term

² Here it is important to note that for Aristotle this was not just a question of cognition but rather his paradigmatic question was more like: “How, if at all,

describes an ability to act against one’s own better judgement, something that has to some extent puzzled philosophers ever since, who ask, how is *self-deception* actually possible.³

To see what is at stake, consider what is involved when one person deceives another. Two conditions seem necessary. Firstly, the deceiver must have the intention to deceive, for one cannot deceive another without intending to. Secondly, the deceiver must have a belief that though in reality one set of circumstances is true, they wish to convince the deceived that another set of circumstances is in fact true, while knowing this to be false.

The problem here is that once we apply this logic to a single person, we generate a number of paradoxes. Namely, how can it be possible that a person could deceive himself while being aware that this is his or her intention, for awareness of such an intention gets in the way of the deception, of arriving at a deceived state of mind. Moreover, a second paradox presents itself when we try to make sense of the notion that a single individual could believe that two contradictory states of affairs are equally and at the same time both true.

Two crucial points relevant to the psychoanalytic privileging

is it possible for people, because of contrary bodily desire for bodily pleasure, knowingly *not* do what they think is best?” (see Stocker and Hegeman (2000), for commentary on this point).

³ As Pears (1982) among others has pointed out, the overlap between what philosophy investigates as cases of “motivated irrationality” and Freud’s unconscious is only partial as the former tends to concentrate attention solely on beliefs or cognitive content that, moreover, the subject has some form of access to (e.g. are at most pre-conscious). However, what Freud was interested in are motivations as causes that radically escape subjective awareness.

of interpretation can be made at this juncture. Firstly, a negative one, is it not the case that any psychological theory, and any treatment stemming from it, should, as a minimum requirement, be able to articulate in what way it handles such long established phenomena? I would suggest that Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), for example, basing itself on learnt cognitive error, fails miserably at this task. Secondly, we need to recognise that Freud, in postulating the notion of a dynamic unconscious, actually solved this problem of self-deception in a very unique way, one that was rooted in clinical realities. Moreover, in a startling move, he also extended the field of self-deception from what one knows/does not know to include the possibility of self-deception at the level of our emotions, desires, and even our very conception of ourselves.

Here it is important to note that for Freud the unconscious was a deduction, one does not find it under the microscope even if neuroscience has in its own way more or less conclusively established that various forms of unconscious thinking exist (Berlin, 2011).

To quote Freud (1914a) on this point:

It may thus be said that the theory of psychoanalysis is an attempt to account for two striking and unexpected facts of observation which emerge whenever an attempt is made to trace the symptoms of a neurotic back to their source in his past life: the facts of transference and of resistance (p. 16).

In other words, encountering transference and resistance led Freud to the unconscious as “another scene,” and thus to what was unacknowledged and hidden by the subject from the subject. This leads to a definition of the unconscious as a “not knowing that I know.” In Lacan’s terms, this entails replacing the term “subject” by that of the “divided subject” as the former, implying a unitary consciousness, is a fiction. Moreover, Freud did not postulate a second consciousness, known philosophically as the homunculus problem, which would have led to an infinite regress. Rather, and as we know, he discovered a form of knowing that was radically different to conscious knowing in that it involved primary process thinking, for example, processes of condensation and displacement that are very different to how we think consciously - which leads immediately to the idea that the unconscious has to be deciphered. What is further implied is that “knowing” within the therapeutic encounter is on the side of the analysand and not the analyst. To put this in other terms, it is the analysand that does the work in an analysis. This work occurs on the basis of the presence of the analyst, who in Lacan’s description of the analytic discourse, must take up the position of “object cause of desire” and, in so doing, wants nothing *a priori* concerning the subject’s good, nor holds any prejudices as to the good use that may be made of him/her.

For example, as early as his *Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud (1900) was adamant that analysis did not work on the basis of suggestion and an analysand is not there to be moulded or made into an image in likeness to the analyst. Rather what counts is the patient’s own material and associations to the dream, in arriving at,

in this case, an understanding of a dream. One can say that there is no codebook for understanding dreams beyond this.

To end these introductory remarks I would like to make a final point. While we can say that a slip of the tongue, a bungled action or a symptom all point to the existence of the unconscious, it is also true to say that the unconscious only really comes into being for a particular subject within the analytic situation. In other words, it is in this situation that the analysand must ask a why question, as in, why do I suffer in this way, which in turn is addressed to “a subject supposed to know” - as against the demand for some sort of quick fix. It is in this way that the subject encounters his/her unconscious. To put this in other terms, it is not enough to produce a dream, a slip, or a symptom to say that we have a Freudian unconscious. Rather such “formations of the unconscious” provide the material that must be developed, worked over, and investigated if a subject is to know something of their own intimate unknown. Lacan put this point in a very succinct way, saying, once we have a formation of the unconscious we need to ask, “What does it want to say,” or as he also put it, “What, by saying, does it want?” It is the route by which one can encounter an enigma, namely, if one wants what one unconsciously desires, which is why Lacan insisted that the nature of the unconscious at stake in psychoanalysis is ethical.

Interpretation Problematised

Turning now to interpretation proper, we can begin with a very simple definition, as in: interpretation seeks to make conscious what is unconscious. However, even though this definition may appear attractive at first sight, from the very birth of psychoanalysis (Studies

on Hysteria, 1895) Freud was aware that such a definition was inadequate. For example, he had direct experience of so-called “cathartic therapy,” linked to the practice of hypnosis that sought to make the unconscious conscious. But, and this is a significant “but,” he found positive effects only when it also achieved a discharge of affect or libido. In other words, the topographical point of view (conscious/unconscious) needed to be linked to the economic one, to the drive and the subject’s affective life if interpretations were to have an effect. One could say here, anticipating Lacan, if they were to impact the body and felt life of the subject, touch the subject’s *jouissance* and not just be grasped as abstract intellectual knowledge. As Freud in his paper, “Wild Psychoanalysis” (1910c/2001) put it:

If knowledge about the unconscious were as important for the patient as people inexperienced in psychoanalysis imagine [then] listening to lectures or reading books would be enough to cure him. Such measures, however, have as much influence on the symptoms of nervous illness as a distribution of menu cards in a time of famine has on hunger (p. 225).

Moreover, as Freud learnt to his detriment, resistance also had to be taken into account, which means making a distinction between what an analyst could know and what an analysand can know. Freud (1920/2001) discovered this when treating a young hysterical patient, where he discovered from the patient’s mother that her symptoms came about when as a young girl she had a homosexual

experience. Outside of what she says to him, he tries to impose this knowledge on her only to find that her symptoms became worse, and in fact, her resistance became so strong that the analysis reached an impasse. Here one can draw a conclusion: analysis privileges what is said, the saying of the subject, over and above what are supposed as facts, and to interpret *always* means basing the interpretation on the words of the analysand.

Indeed this is the reason that, unlike in the psychological literature where “how to” manuals abound, there are far fewer analytic books on technique and the “how” of clinical practice, as against theory. Obviously some do exist (e.g. Glover (1955), Greenson (1967), Etchegoyen (1991), etc.) but what one sees here are general guidelines, paradigmatic examples and even conflicting viewpoints. Bringing clarity to this issue, Lacan insisted that analytic interpretation depends on the “desire of the analyst,” a desire for absolute difference, which means that interpretations need to be singular and unique, and thus we can say that the psychoanalytic clinic is a clinic of the “once off” rather than the repeatable. To understand the logic that supports this, the reader may consult Eric Laurent’s (2006), *Guiding Principles for Any Psychoanalytic Act*, in which he lays out eight principles that guide Lacanian analytic practice but do not constrain the analyst in his or her act. Here he demonstrates in a precise way how an analyst embodies the proposition that interpretation is without standards, but not without principles.

In “The Direction of the Treatment,” Lacan (1958/2006) underlines this point when he states that, at the level of tactics,

namely one’s interventions, the analyst remains “sole master” of his ship:

... of course I am far from able to weigh the whole effect of my words, I am well aware of the fact and strive to attend to it. In other words, I am always free in the timing and frequency, as well as in the choice of my interventions, so much so that it seems the rule [free association] has been entirely designed so as not to interfere in any way with my activity as an executor - to which corresponds the aspect of the ‘material’ which is how my action here is taken up in what it produces (p. 491).

Interestingly, this tension between specifying what analytic technique should look like, and keeping the freedom of the analyst at the centre of analytic practice, goes all the way back to Freud who abandoned an idea he once entertained of writing a book on clinical technique and in fact wrote relatively little directly on this topic. Indeed, here it is revealing to quote from a letter he wrote to Ferenczi in 1926 (as follows:

The “Recommendation on Technique” I wrote long ago were essentially of a negative nature. I considered the most important thing was to emphasize what one should **not** do, and to point out the temptations in directions contrary to analysis. Almost everything positive that one should do I left to “tact”...The result was that the docile analysts did not perceive the elasticity of the rules I had laid down, and

submitted to them as if they were taboos. Sometime all that must be revised, without, it is true, doing away with the obligations I had mentioned (p. 241).

At this point, and before going deeper into what is specific to Lacanian interpretation, I will discuss some other forms of psychoanalytic interpretation which Lacan was critical of, to the extent that they base themselves on the idea of a meta-language.

We can get a clearer idea of this by referring to a paper by Laurent (2008), entitled "Interpreting Psychosis from Day to Day," in which he discusses various debates on interpretation within the IPA and particularly a paper by Etchegoyen (1991) which takes up this theme. As Laurent points out, what Lacan objected to was a distinction being made between the spoken language of the analysand (the object language) and the language of interpretation which translates this into another form, and gives it another meaning, the true meaning (the meta-language). It implies a correspondence theory of truth, requiring the unconscious to be translated, in that the unconscious here is viewed as containing an alternative reality, a meaning behind and beyond what the patient says. However, the problem with this approach is that any reading that tries to replace the original text invariably distorts, for it means that the "reader" imposes his or her own meanings. In Frege's terms, this changes both the "sense" and "reference" of what is said, rather than allowing the meanings of the "author" to be realised. As Laurent succinctly puts it, interpretation is rather about "making something heard," and the direction of the treatment concerns what the analysand has to be "made to hear" in his or her own discourse.

Some concrete examples from Etchegoyen's paper, based on examples and material originally presented by Kohut (1984), should make this clearer. The situation discussed concerns one in which an analyst has to unexpectedly cancel a session and in the next session the patient is withdrawn and silent and does not respond to the analyst's invitation to speak. So, as Etchegoyen, citing Kohut, points out, we can here explore a number of scenarios. From a Kleinian perspective, and privileging the idea of drive conflict, one might imagine the analyst saying something like:

The cancellation seems to have transformed me from a good breast/object into a bad one and made you intensely angry so that you want to destroy and bite this bad breast/object, which has brought about an inhibition in speech.

Such an interpretation may no doubt have an effect and indeed the analyst in this case reported a positive one in that the patient did begin to speak. Despite this, it is relatively easy to see that with this interpretation, the analyst, evoking the oral drive, makes a leap, for the simple reason that the interpretation does not proceed from the analysand's signifiers.

In a similar way, one can imagine an ego psychology interpretation, incorporating a clear Oedipal dimension, which emphasises a past trauma or event. Here, for example, an analyst might say something like the following:

My sudden cancellation and your silence and withdrawal today reflect the way you reacted when as a child your mother excluded you from the bedroom in order to be with and sleep with your father.

Once again, this interpretation may have an effect, and it is linked to a prior knowledge of the patient's history. However, crucially and problematically, it is a link that the analyst forges, forcing a meaning on the analysand's silence without the presence of signifying elements from the analysand that their silence is a reaction to being, in this case, traumatically "excluded."

A third example from a self-psychology perspective, and assuming what Kohut says, a narcissistic patient, allows consideration of an interpretation focusing on self-other developmental trauma as follows:

You felt that your self-esteem was undermined by this sudden cancellation in the same way as when in childhood your distant mother suddenly deprived you of the warm-hearted contact you had with your Nanny who praised you.

The essential point, according to Kohut, is that these examples should all be considered "wild interpretations" as they are not based on the patient's associations. Kohut further argued that each of these interpretations, though quite different, may have a positive effect, and be accepted by a patient, only to the extent that each conveys in some form the following: "You are deeply upset by the fact that one of your appointments has been cancelled" (p. 94). This represents a

"correct underlying message," according to Kohut (what should have been said to the patient), even as the theory conveying this message is, in the above examples, both defective and distorting.

However, what Kohut does not problematise is that analytic interpretation on this basis is reduced to a form of empathy, – notwithstanding that this, defined as "vicarious introspection" (p. 82), is a fundamental tenet within self-psychology, captured in the notion of the "mirror transference." Etchegoyen offers a final twist to all of this by arguing a more accurate interpretation would not, without some further indication from the analysand, force a connection to the cancelled session (as Kohut's interpretation does) but should have rather conveyed to the patient that: "[s]omething was disturbing her and she was unable to express it" (p. 96).

Lacan was critical of this sort of analysis and Lacanian analysts abstain from making empathetic understanding the basis for interpretation, or what is more or less the same thing, and refrain from making identifications with the patient. Importantly this does not mean one does not recognise aggression or losses or abandonments when these are important for a subject, but, as in the examples above, when lacking warrant, such interpretations are invariably based on a theoretical apparatus at the moment of interpretation, which is, in effect, a meta-language.

As Laurent points out, Lacanian interpretation, in renouncing any appeal to a meta-language, is not isomorphic or based on equivalences and is not a translation either. Rather its aim is to evoke so that, "the subject can recognise what used to be alien to him as being part of him" (p. 88). In the above-imagined scenario, a Lacanian interpretation, accepting the use of the analyst by the

analysand, would be minimal and unlikely to go beyond a process of naming, a putting of the session into speech, a returning of the silence to the analysand. For example, the analyst might end the session in a similar way to other sessions, thus emphasising the formal frame and nature of the session itself, marking the opaque silence as itself a “speech act,” (albeit one that occurs on the basis of a negation - *not* speaking), by saying simply, “lets end there,” or by saying, this time a little more explicitly, “lets pause this silence here.” Here, the desire of the analyst is present but nothing is imposed on the subject beyond the interpretive frame itself.⁴ The worst is to impose words that only make sense for the analyst, as Lacan himself emphasised.

This is a clinic in which what is important is that something is heard, in this sense, something new and thus on the side of “revelation” to use Lacan’s own term, for this is about what the analysand “has to encounter” within his or her own speech. In this, it privileges a creationist logic where not only is the duration of the session unpredictable (which is a source of its effectiveness), but the predictable, familiar and “already known” in terms of interpretation (e.g. meta-language/theoretical construction) and its effects, are avoided.

Interpretation Reversed

⁴ I am reminded here of a description of a clinical case in which a psychotic patient, having been silent for many sessions, commented one day on leaving the consulting room how his recent sessions had been extremely helpful to him. This was in effect, a productive *use* of the analyst/analytic session, wherein he managed to silence the torment of his voices.

To go further into this topic of Lacanian interpretation, which is a form of interpretation that values not closure but disclosure, the place to start is with Miller’s paper *Interpretation in Reverse* (1996/99). In doing so, I will introduce a quote from Lacan (1964/1977) from *Seminar XI* as follows:

Interpretation is not open to any meaning. That would be to concede to those who rise up against the character of uncertainty in analytic interpretation that, in effect, all interpretations are possible, which is patently absurd. The fact that I have said that the effect of interpretation is to isolate in the subject a kernel, a *kern* to use Freud’s own term, of *non-sense*, does not mean that interpretation is itself nonsense ... [w]hat is essential is that he should see, beyond this signification, to what signifier – to what irreducible, traumatic, non-meaning – he is, as a subject, subjected. (p. 250/251).

Miller begins his paper in a startling way by saying “the age of interpretation is behind us” (p.9), by which he seeks to make clear that in the Lacanian psychoanalytic orientation, interpretation ultimately does not take the path of meaning-making, in the sense of giving or adding meaning to what the patient says. Why? Because as he states, the unconscious interprets, because interpretation is included in the very concept of the unconscious, because desire, and with it the symptom, is an interpretation of and by the unconscious, and thus anything the analyst might add is secondary to that.

Here is a quote from Miller who is speaking to an audience of analysts:

To resonate, to allude, to imply, to be silent, to be the oracle, to quote, to be enigmatic, to catch it in the half-saying, to reveal – but who does this? Who does this better than you do? Who handles this rhetoric as if by birth, while you struggle to learn its rudiments? Who, but the unconscious itself (p. 10).

He goes on to say that one of the best minimal forms an analytic interpretation might take is to convey to the analysand that, “I agree with you, but you said it first” (p.10), which is something that might be achieved along the lines of quoting or repeating something the analysand said. Miller acknowledges that the unconscious in a sense wants to be interpreted, pushes towards interpretation, for what is a dream if not that. However, every deciphering is in essence another ciphering and thus the question becomes how, in analysis, do we move beyond this level of enjoyment in meaning, an enjoyment that can make analysis interminable.

The answer Lacan gave, and it is contained within Lacan’s quote above, is that one must find a way to interpret in a mode different to the unconscious. This is a mode which separates the subject from this love of meaning, and instead returns the subject to his or her primary or elementary signifiers upon which Miller says the subject has constructed his or her neurotic “delusion,” a word that marks a difference from the early theorising of Lacan where his reference point was to the “individual neurotic myth.” If there is here

deciphering, it is, as Miller says, a deciphering that does not produce sense but is rather focused on one’s mode of enjoying, and on the contingences of the subject’s encounter with *jouissance*. To quote Miller :

The reverse of interpretation consists in encircling the signifier as the elementary phenomenon of the subject, and as it was before it was articulated in the formation of the unconscious, which gives it a sense of delusion (p. 13).

In this, Miller states that the cut of the session, as against punctuation, is the paradigmatic analytic intervention. This is because punctuation still leans on meaning, and, in a relatively limited way, produces ever more meaning in relation to the speech of the subject. The cut, on the other hand, aims at a separation between S1 and S2, between signifiers and their uptake in meaning. It is here that one can say that an analysis is about a reduction in meaning, a shrinking of meaning, a shift towards an encounter with the real of *jouissance* within the subject’s life.⁵ A final quote from Miller makes this clear:

The question is not to know whether the session is long or short, silent or chatty. Either the session is a semantic unity in which S2 comes to punctuate the elaboration – delusion in the Name of the Father (many sessions are like that), or the

⁵ A simple example here might be to encounter how behind the labyrinthine descriptions of one’s relationships with others one is actually always doing and enjoying the same thing, for example, either “running away” or “pushing the other away.”

analytic session is an a-semantic unity bringing the subject back to the opacity of his jouissance (p.15).

Adding finally:

I oppose the path of elaboration to the one of perplexity. Don't worry about elaboration. There will always be too much of it (p. 15).

Interpretation in Lacanian Clinical Practice

At this point, it is important to say that analysis is not just about interpretation even if this is its primary aim and *modus operandi*. In other words, an analyst, especially in the early stages of an analysis, is not restricted to this mode of intervention alone. If he or she were, it would be both problematic and odd. In other words there is, and there need to be, other interventions in play. One wants the neurotic, for example, to speak of and construct their childhood history, to find therein-significant moments that impacted on their subjective formation, to elaborate on the difficulties they experience in their life, etc. In this sense, an analyst is always saying, "tell me more," give me those "divine details" that count, and it would be a mistake to think that, for example, as an analyst one does not ask questions, comment on a contradiction, utter a polite comment, or more significantly, intervene to help lower anxiety in a situation where the subject is on the verge of a *passage à l'acte*. In other words, it is integral to an analysis that the case is constructed, whereby much of what is said reveals its organisation and pre-conditions, providing a level of internal coherence to the material within, and this is crucial

for Lacanian practice, a diagnostic framework based on psychic structure.⁶ This is a way of saying that one seeks the singularity of a patient's structure/diagnosis, the particular way or style in which a subject is, for example, obsessional, hysteric, or alternatively, inhabits one of the multiple ways of being psychotic.

Patrick Moribot (2009), traces various theoretical shifts in Lacan's work before discussing in particular equivocation as a mode of interpretation that is especially emphasised by the later Lacan (i.e. post-1972). While drawing on this article, I will here seek to describe more generally the five primary modes of interpretation as deployed within a Lacanian orientation, as follows:

- *Citation*: meaning, to cite/quote/repeat something the analysand says, which may at first sight not seem like an interpretation, until one adds that what one aims at here is something said/enunciated whereby the unconscious, as another scene, emerges in the speech of the subject. Such a mode of interpretation does not function like an echo, but rather restores or returns something to the analysand of their speech act, making for example, what is enigmatic there appear as enigma for the subject - in order to put it to work. In other words, to "hear it" so that an analysand may put what is heard into a dialectical relation, and account for it in terms of what else he or she is in the process of

⁶ For example, there is a significant difference in the way a Lacanian analyst interprets in cases of psychosis compared to neurosis as in the former case what is paramount is for the subject to find a mode of subjective stabilisation (see Rowan, 2012).

saying/doing. It is thus a within session interpretative act aimed at producing further material, an aperture to unconscious meaning and new formations of the unconscious. As with all forms of Lacanian interpretation, this does not aim at regression but at a signifying moment whereby the analysand is inscribed into the reality of his or her unconscious - as spoken - and in this sense as present/lived by the subject.⁷ Here it is essential to note that the analyst has an important resource of language at his/her disposal (as with all forms of interpretation) based on a distinction Lacan made in terms of what is enunciated (said), versus the act of enunciation (saying). In other words *how* the analyst repeats what a patient says counts, and he or she may deploy this paralinguistic element to good effect by repeating what the patient has said in, for example, either an interrogative, energetic, imperative or bland way.

- *Punctuation*: meaning to punctuate or end the analytic session on a particular saying of the analysand. This is akin to editing, by virtue of punctuation, the analysand's speech so that something else can be heard within it. Its importance is given weight by the ending of the session, which confronts the analysand with the emergence of a meaning effect that cannot easily be covered over or become buried in further elaboration. Here, the "variable session," as with all modes of Lacanian interpretation, is employed. The "session ending"

⁷ One could make a distinction here between the past, what has gone before in the life of a subject, and the "past as present" within a subject's life.

is here a psychoanalytic act, one that is not bound to clock time or any notion of contracted-for time but rather emerges as a moment of surprise, a "chance moment" (*tuché*) that aims to introduce the subject to a "time of understanding" as against further "saying." It is a moment in which the unconscious, as unpredictable contingency, is grasped, a moment that goes beyond a "this means that." Here, an emerging meaning is emphasised, fixed or made definite by the analyst's intervention.

Examples might include suddenly putting into question a particular signifier or meaning, or bringing into focus empty and repetitive speech which then might be freed up to take a different direction, or, where meaning is wavering and vacillating, allowing something to crystallise and become clear for the subject. In its most direct form, this might amount to the analyst simply saying something like, "that's it" (implying: "you have said it"/"it is clear"). It is a semantic intervention, and thus on the side of meaning, but one that does not aim to give direction to the analysand but rather aims to illuminate an unconscious reality within his or her doing. As such, interpretation here functions as a mode of recognition, aimed at grasping the moment when the subject can encounter an unconscious knowing that has erupted in his or her speech/life.

Further examples might be ending a session at a point where a subject articulates a signifier that indicates a subjective position based on identification, or a new commitment, or a surprising want made clear, or when an

analysand speaks in a new or significant way of his/her desire. Or again, one might end a session on a repeated or recurring signifier, underlining a key (unrecognised) signifier for a particular subject, one that, to a greater or lesser extent, they "make-meaning-with," as a way of organising and giving sense to his/her life or life choices. A final example would be ending a session on a slip or parapraxis, a moment when the unconscious is clearly present as that which disturbs one's conscious sense of who one is and/or what one desires.

- *Cutting the session*: meaning a different form and use of the session ending, to make a cut or ending of the session that aims not at sense but at stopping the chain of signifiers in their tracks. This suspends meaning in order to encircle and make jump out what Miller (1996/99) terms the subject's "elementary signifiers." (p. 13). It is a point through which the subject encounters his/her "music," which is his or her mode and style of enjoyment that runs like the proverbial thread through everything they do. It is a mode of psychoanalytic intervention based not on what the analysand is "saying," but rather concerns the question of what is satisfying him or her within the "said" of their speech. Such interpretations represent a "showing," or a pointing-to something that in this sense is non-discursive, or a-semantic, and aims at what exists "beyond meaning."

In this, the cut functions as an act that aims at the always-particular mode of *jouissance* a subject embodies -

indicating a "there is the real of your enjoyment." What is at stake in such an interpretation is the subject's relation to *jouissance*, meaning his or her embodied enjoyment, a life-style, where speech, for example, ceases to be a search for the response of the Other, but rather represents a means of "enjoyment." It is in relation to this that Lacan introduced the concept of *Lalangue* to highlight how, in every dimension of Being, the subject is impacted by and immersed within their particular way of handling *jouissance*. In *Encore* (1972-73/1998), he goes so far as to state: "[r]eality is approached with apparatuses of *jouissance*... there's no other apparatus than language. That is how *jouissance* is fitted out (*appareillée*) in speaking beings" (p. 55). It is thus that the subject may encounter their mode of *jouissance*, in what Lacan termed a time of perplexity. This is a time in which a question concerning how a subject chooses to deploy or use his or her *jouissance*, their "way of enjoying/suffering," within their life, arises. In other words, how, when the suffering of the symptom becomes bearable, the subject in an identification with their *Sinthome*⁸ makes of *jouissance* something that is liveable and acceptable to them - a point where they can have a "know how to do" with the "outside-meaning" of the drive.

⁸ Lacan introduced the term "Sinthome" in order to designate what underpins the symptom, and remains when its suffering is alleviated. It refers to the way each "speaking being" uniquely experiences *jouissance* via the impact of language on the body.

- *Quilting point/allusion*: meaning the introduction of a new signifier, functioning always as a tentative/allusive distillation of what is implicated in the speech of the analysand. It is tentative in that it is the analysand's response to this that counts in calling it an interpretation. It refers, for example, to the unsaid or the "impossible to say" of the subject's speech that appears as nevertheless present within the network of signifiers he or she uses, as precisely, a missing signifier which, once introduced, changes the meaning of what is already there. It is in his seminar on psychosis (1955-56) that Lacan first introduced the concept of the "quilting point," using an example from the play *Athalie* by Racine. Here a new signifier, "fear of God", transmutes all the fears of the character Abner into courage, showing how such a quilting point makes operative the power of language to usher in a new sense, ending what was a proliferation of meanings. It is a signifying function that aims at giving coherence, in the sense of linking or gathering together what in the analysand's speech remains unrelated, isolated or without an organising thread; in Freud's terms, it is a case of crossing the barrier of repression. A simple example might be that of a male analysand whose analysis is focused on his myriad difficulties with and complaints about, women. At a certain point, the analyst "quilts" this flow of meaning with an interpretation, a new signification, that says something like, "all women are for you demanding mothers." Though an imagined example, one can appreciate the potential impact of such an interpretation on the

analysand's complaints, and how such an interpretation has the power to alter and re-organise such complaints and difficulties based on this distillation of the signifiers of the analysand.

This adding of signification to the speech of the analysand requires the discreet judgement of the analyst and necessarily occurs against a backdrop of silence and listening, a necessary prerequisite to any "reading" of the unsayable of the analysand's signifiers. It is interesting to briefly note here how this form of interpretation has certain affinities and differences to Bion's use of what he termed the "selected fact", or later in his writings, "invariance." Bion borrowed this term from the gifted French mathematician and polymath, Poincaré, and it is thus worth quoting Poincaré's definition of the selected fact as follows: "if a new result is to have any value, it must unite elements long since known, but till then scattered and seemingly foreign to each other, and suddenly introduce order where the appearance of disorder reigned. Thus it enables us to see at a glance each of these elements in the place it occupies in the whole" (quoted in Bion, 1962, p. 72).

- *Equivocation*: meaning to interpret using the ambiguities of language. This arguably represents the most poetic side of interpretation. It opens the analysand's signifiers to more than one meaning. Lacan, in *L'Etourdit*, extended this "play on words" beyond homophonic instances to include modes of grammatical and logical equivocation. In some ways, this

form of interpretation is the most delicate of all, for, like poetry, it must reach the subject as an invitation that touches something real and is not superficial or just plain puzzling. As Gueguen (1996/1999) points out, a certain passion for “the laws of language,” for metaphoric and metonymic interpretations, led some of Lacan’s students to an erratic use of homophony, “transforming in the worst cases the psychoanalytic treatment into an exchange of formations of the unconscious, those of the analyst coming into rivalry with those of the analysand” (pp. 21-22). In *L’Etourdit*, as Gueguen indicates, Lacan set the record straight, in that this form of interpretation requires the analyst’s judgement, an ability to make use of it when it is fitting. In other words, and at a moment that warrants it, this means effecting or provoking a split in the subject, a division between what is said and what is meant, and further, evokes a way of defining the unconscious as the discrepancy or the signifying interruption between what one wants to say or do, and what one actually says or does.

Even though Lacan emphasised this form of interpretation, it would be a mistake not to recognise that the roots of this mode of interpretation are in Freud. In numerous instances Freud demonstrates how the unconscious functions via a “play on words,” thus underpinning the rationale for this form of interpretation. For example, to understand the Ratman’s (1909/2001) tormenting obsession with the story of the “rat torture” it is essential to see how the word “rat” (“Ratte” in German)

forms “linguistic bridges” to other key signifiers in the Ratman’s life, such as “Hieraten” (to marry), “Rate” (instalment - as in payment), “Rat” (advice), etc.

In his paper on Fetishism (1927/2001), Freud shows how such homophonic equivocations can function between one language and another. He describes a patient whose sexual interest in women was aroused when he perceived a certain “shine” on a woman’s nose (“Glanz” in German means “shine”) which turned out to be connected to the English word “glance” and to a time when this patient’s sexual researches as a child (at that time he was English speaking) were centered on what he could sneak a “glance” at, namely, female nakedness. This example from Freud presents a good, if unusual, bilingual example of the essential element in this form of interpretation whereby the analyst alludes to another meaning in what is said, leading the analysand not only to question what he or she actually said, but also to the possibility that the meaning in question is quite other to what the subject is conscious of. To interpret in this way is to be alert to, and able to use, the ambiguities and ambivalences of language when, in analysis, a word or phrase occurs that carries additional unconscious weight for a particular subject.

These may include common homophonies (e.g. morning/mourning, ascent/assent, air/are/err/heir etc.), though usually in clinical practice such instances are more idiosyncratic. For example, a patient talks of how she hates her older sister, her rival, who is called *Isabel*, whereby what

can be heard in her sister's name is "is able" - an unconscious meaning that contrasts with how this patient felt constantly "disabled" in relation to her aspirations and ambitions.

"Grammatical equivocation," by contrast, occurs when what equivocates does so by virtue of the structure of the sentence/phrase spoken having another potential context which changes its meaning. What linguists refer to as indexicals (or "shifters"), offer a paradigmatic example of this, as the meaning of such words are in essence governed by context (for example, when I use the word "you," the person I am referring to is dependent on the context in which this speech act is made). Here the analyst is attentive to, and seeks to make use of, those instances where this sort of contextual indeterminacy emerges in speech. Moribot offers an example of an anorexic girl who never speaks of her anorectic symptom, but in speaking about an exam, she says, "the oral is making me anxious." Here, repeating this phrase brings about a shift in context, bringing into focus how beyond the exam she claims she is worried about, it is the oral drive that causes her anxiety and torments her (p. 43). This is an interpretation that, via an equivocation, makes emerge two "orals," alongside two quite different subjects or senses of "I."

Logical equivocation represents a third way in which interpretation can capture another voice or disposition, silently present and beyond conscious intention, within the signifiers and "meaning-making" of a subject. The divided

subject emerges on the basis of contraries and shifts in word meaning, which include contradictions, but also range more widely. Sometimes a patient may unknowingly contradict themselves, saying in effect that something is black and not black at the same time, and while such moments are important (both statements cannot be true and thus "push" the subject to question what he/she could possibly mean) it is more usual clinically for logical equivocations to involve more subtle shifts in meaning.⁹ For example, a patient speaks of feeling incompetent at work, and then later, of their boss being pleased with their work. Here, both statements can be true (i.e. it is not strictly a logical contradiction) even though the content of the two statements is contradictory.

So called "dynamic contradictions" offer another form in which there is a close tie between "action" and "reaction." Simple examples include, "I want to be close to him/her...but I always push him/her away" or "I want to be kind/supportive to him/her...but I am always being angry and critical." However, it must be emphasised that clarifying thought or eliminating what is equivocal is not what is of prime importance here. Rather, the analyst uses the

⁹ Many jokes make use of logical equivocations, and though not the main point of the joke, broadly illustrate the sort of shifts in meaning that when *not* a joke can lead an analyst towards interpretation. For example: a Judge in a divorce case says, "Mr Johnson, having reviewed this case carefully I have decided to give your wife 3000 euro per month". Husband replies, "That is extremely generous your Honor - and I am sure I can also help out from time to time."

presence of such equivocations to open a path to the nature of unconscious desire and *jouissance*, the “want to say” or “want to enjoy” established by the contingencies of a signifying encounter at play in the forming and maintaining of such equivocations for a particular subject. Another example from Monribot illustrates this. A woman analysand, on entering the session, says *au revoir* while meaning to say *Bonjour*, representing a verbal slip in the form of a logical equivocation. The analyst responds, in this case in quite a dramatic way, by recognising that her “unconscious” produced a blunder, and ended the session. In this case, the slip, followed by the ending of the session, had a number of resonances for this particular analysand, while also posing the question of what she wants from her analysis. It thus revisits a key point made earlier in this paper, that the art of interpretation is a process in which what is at stake is the “know-how” the analysand can acquire, in contrast to knowledge being on the side of the analyst.

Conclusion

In concluding, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the present paper in that what is presented is an overview and as such is neither definitive nor exhaustive in its attempt to describe a Lacanian approach to interpretation. For example, it does not go into the fine detail of how the Lacanian interpretative stance takes on, for example, a different tone and style in working with different diagnostic presentations - most particularly in differentiating between psychosis and neurosis. Some issues have also been left to

one side, perhaps most particularly the question of countertransference, which Lacan was highly critical of, if used as a basis for interpretation, because it privileges the imaginary of emotional experience in the place of language, and further presents deep epistemological problems in terms of its status.

To end this paper, two short quotes from Miller (2011) seem useful. The first states that, “the Lacanian analyst has to construct, there is no doubt about it” (p. 58). The second states that, “[t]he true consent, the consent of being which is the one toward which the analytic work has to lead, a consent to the unconscious as repressed, that is to say as vehicle of *jouissance*” (p. 62). These quotations serve to indicate a trajectory in the work of interpretation, from the repressed unconscious to the real unconscious, from interpretations that privilege meaning (which is infinite), to those interpretations that allow the subject to encounter the nature and form of a *jouissance* that inhabits them. In one sense, this returns us to Lacan’s version of the Freudian drive, an encounter with a limit point, a body, first touched by, and then immersed in language/meaning, a body that thus enjoys, suffers, gives pleasure, etc., in an always-particular way for an always-singular subject.