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Nietzsche, Freud, Marx*

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This plan for a "round table,"¹ when it was proposed to me, appeared very interesting, but clearly quite puzzling. I suggest a subterfuge: some themes concerning *the techniques of interpretation* in Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud.

In reality, behind these themes there is a dream that one day it will be possible to make a kind of general corpus, an encyclopedia of all the techniques of interpretation that we can know from the Greek grammarians to our time. I think that few of the chapters of this great corpus of all the techniques of interpretation have thus far been drawn up. It seems to me that one could say, as a general introduction to this idea of a history of techniques of interpretation, that language, at least language in Indo-European cultures, has always given rise to two kinds of suspicions.

—First of all, the suspicion that language does not say exactly what it means [*le langage ne dit pas exactement ce qu'il dit*]. The meaning [sens] that one grasps, and that is immediately manifest, is perhaps in reality only a lesser meaning [moindre sens] that shields, restrains, and despite everything transmits another meaning, the meaning "underneath it" ["d'en dessous"]. This is what the Greeks called *allegoria* and *hyponoia*.

—On the other hand, language gives rise to another suspicion: that in some way it overflows its properly verbal form, and that there are many other things in the world that speak, and that are not language. After all, it might be that nature, the sea, rustling trees, animals, faces, masks, crossed swords all speak. Perhaps there is some language articulating itself in a way that would not be verbal. This would be, if you wish, very crudely, the *semainon* of the Greeks.

These two suspicions, which we see appearing already in Greek texts, have not disappeared. They are still our contemporaries, as once again we have come to believe, precisely since the nineteenth century, that mute gestures, illnesses, all the confusion around us can speak as well. More than

ever we are at the listening post of all this possible language, trying to overhear, beneath the words, a discourse that would be more essential.

I think that each culture, I mean each cultural form in Western civilization, has had its system of interpretation, its techniques, its methods, its way of suspecting that language means something other than what it says, and of suspecting that there is language elsewhere than in language. It seems in fact that there was an attempt to establish the system or the table, as they used to say in the seventeenth century, of all these systems of interpretation.

To understand what sort of system of interpretation the nineteenth century founded and, as a result, to what sort of system of interpretation we others, even now, belong, it seems to me that it would be necessary to take a distant reference, a type of technique as may have existed, for example, in the sixteenth century. At that time, resemblance was what gave rise to interpretation, at one and the same time its general site and the minimal unity that interpretation had to treat. There, where things were like each other, there, where *interpretation* would resemble itself, something wanted to be said and could be deciphered. The important role played by resemblance and all the notions that revolved like satellites around it in the cosmology, the botany, the zoology, and the philosophy of the sixteenth century are well known. To tell the truth, to our eyes as people of the twentieth century, this whole network of similitudes is fairly confused and entangled. In fact, this corpus of resemblance in the sixteenth century was perfectly organized. There were at least five exactly defined notions:

—The notion of convenience [*convenance*, propriety, expediency, fitness], *convenientia*, which is agreement (for example, of the soul to the body, or the animal series to the vegetable series).

—The notion of *sympatheia*, sympathy, which is the identity of accidents in distinct substances.

—The notion of *emulatio*, which is the very curious parallelism of attributes in substances or in distinct beings, such that the attributes of one being are like the reflection of the other's attributes. (Thus Porta explains that the human face, with the seven parts that distinguish it, is the emulation of the sky with its seven planets.)

—The notion of *signatura*, the signature, which is the image of an invisible and hidden property among the visible properties of an individual.

—And then, of course, the notion of *analogie*, which is the identity of the relations between two or more distinct substances.

At that time, the theory of the sign and the techniques of interpretation rested in fact on a perfectly clear definition of all the possible types of resemblance, and they had established two types of completely distinct knowledge: *cognitio*, which was the passage, in some way lateral, from one

resemblance to another; and *divinatio*, which was the deep knowledge [*connaissance en profondeur*], going from a superficial resemblance to a more profound resemblance. All these resemblances manifest the *consensus* of the world that lays their foundation; they resist the *simulacrum*, the false resemblance which rests on the discord between God and the Devil.

If these techniques of interpretation of the sixteenth century were left suspended by the evolution of Western thought in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, if the Baconian and Cartesian critique of resemblance certainly played a large part in their being put in parentheses, the nineteenth century, and quite singularly Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, placed us once again in the presence of a new possibility of interpretation. They founded anew the possibility of a hermeneutic.

The first book of *Capital* and texts like *The Birth of Tragedy*, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, and the *Interpretation of Dreams* place us in the presence of these interpretive techniques. And the shock effect, the type of wound provoked in Western thought by these works, comes probably from something they reconstituted before our eyes that Marx, himself, moreover, called "hieroglyphs." This has put us in an uncomfortable situation, since these techniques of interpretation concern ourselves: since we interpret, we interpret ourselves according to these techniques. It is with these techniques of interpretation, in return, that we must question these interpreters who were Freud, Nietzsche, and Marx, so that we are always returned in a perpetual play of mirrors.

Freud says somewhere that there are three great narcissistic wounds in Western culture: the wound imposed by Copernicus; that made by Darwin, when he discovered that man was descended from the ape; and the wound made by Freud himself when he, in his turn, discovered that consciousness was based on the unconscious. I wonder whether we could not say that by involving us in an interpretive task that always reflects upon itself, Freud, Nietzsche, and Marx did not constitute around us, and for us, those mirrors which reflect to us the images whose inexhaustible wounds form our contemporary narcissism. In any case, and it is to this proposal that I would like to make some suggestions, it seems to me that Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud have not somehow multiplied the signs in the Western world. They have not given a new meaning to things which did not have any meaning. In reality they have changed the nature of the sign, and modified the way in which the sign in general could be interpreted.

The first question that I want to pose is this: have not Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche profoundly modified the distributive space [*répartition, assessment*] in which signs can be signs? At the time that I have taken for a point of reference, the sixteenth century, signs were disposed of in a homo-

geneous way in a space that was itself in all directions homogeneous. Signs of the earth turned back to the sky, but they turned back as well to the underground world; they turned back reciprocally, from man to animal, from animal to plant. From the nineteenth century on, that is, from Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche, signs are themselves stages in a much more differentiated space, according to a dimension that we could call depth, on the condition that one understand by that not interiority but, on the contrary, exteriority.

I am thinking in particular of the long debate with depth that Nietzsche never stopped maintaining. There is in the works of Nietzsche a critique of ideal depth, the depth of consciousness that he denounces as an invention of the philosophers. This depth would be a pure, interior search for truth. Nietzsche shows how depth implies resignation, hypocrisy, the mask, so that the interpreter, when he surveys signs in order to denounce them, must descend the length of the vertical line and show that this depth of interiority is in reality something other than what appears. It is necessary, therefore, that the interpreter descend, that he be, as he says, "the good excavator of the underworld."²

But when one interprets, one can in reality traverse this descending line only to restore the sparkling exteriority that has been covered up and buried. The fact is that whereas the interpreter must go himself to the bottom of things like an excavator, the movement of interpretation is, on the contrary, one that projects out over the depth, raised more and more above the depth, always leaving the depth below, exposed to ever greater visibility. The depth is now restored as an absolutely superficial secret, in such a way that the eagle's taking flight, the ascent of the mountain, all the verticality so important in Zarathustra, is, in the strict sense, the reversal of depth, the discovery that depth was only a game, and a crease [*pli*] in the surface. As the world becomes more profound under our gaze, one notices that everything that exercised the profundity of man was only child's play.

I wonder whether this spatiality, Nietzsche's play with profundity, could be compared to the apparently different game that Marx conducted with platitude. The concept of "platitude" is very important in the works of Marx. At the beginning of *Capital*,³ he explains how, contrary to Perseus, he should bury himself in the uncertainty to show in fact that there are neither monsters nor profound enigmas. Instead one finds that all there is of profundity in the conception that the bourgeoisie have of money, of capital, of value, and so forth is in reality only platitude.

And, of course, it would be necessary to recall the interpretive space that Freud constituted, not only in the celebrated topology of Consciousness and the Unconscious, but equally in the rules that he formulated for psychoanalytic attention, and the deciphering by the analyst of what is said all

along the spoken "chain." One should recall the spatiality, after all quite material, to which Freud attached so much importance, and which exposes the patient under the watchful gaze of the psychoanalyst.

The second theme I would like to propose to you, which is moreover somewhat tied to the former, would be to indicate that, beginning with these three men who now speak to us, interpretation at last became an endless task. To tell the truth, it was already that in the sixteenth century, but the signs were exchanged back and forth, quite simply because resemblance could only be limited. From the nineteenth century on, signs were linked in an inexhaustible as well as infinite network, not because they rested on a resemblance without border, but because there are irreducible gaps and openings.

The incompleteness of interpretation, the fact that it is always fragmented and initially remains suspended on itself, is met with again. I believe, in a sufficiently similar way in the works of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud in the form of the denial of origination [commencement]: the denial of the "Robinsonade," said Marx; the distinction, so important in the works of Nietzsche, between the beginning and the origin; and the always incomplete character of the regressive and analytic practice in the works of Freud. It is above all in the works of Nietzsche and Freud, and to a lesser degree in those of Marx, that we see delineated this experience, which I believe to be so important for modern hermeneutics, that the further one goes in interpretation, the closer one approaches at the same time an absolutely dangerous region where interpretation is not only going to find its points of no return but where it is going to disappear itself as interpretation, bringing perhaps the disappearance of the interpreter himself. The existence that always approached some absolute point of interpretation would be at the same time that of a breaking point [*point de rupture*].

In the works of Freud, it is well known how progressively the discovery of this structurally open character of interpretation is forced structurally wide open. It was done first in a very allusive way, quite hidden by itself in the *Interpretation of Dreams*, when Freud analyzed his own dreams, and he invoked reasons of modesty or nondivulgence of a personal secret in order to interrupt himself. In the analysis of Dora, one sees appear this idea that interpretation must stop itself, unable to go to its conclusion in consideration of something that some years later will be called *transference*. And then, the inexhaustibility of analysis affirms itself across the entire study of transference in the infinite and infinitely problematic character of the relationship of the analyzed and the analyst, a relationship which is clearly constituent for psychoanalysis—one that opens the space in which it never stops deploying itself without ever being able to be finished.

In the works of Nietzsche also, it is clear that interpretation is always unfinished. What is philosophy for him if not a sort of philology always suspended, a philology without end, always further unfolded, a philology which would never be absolutely fixed? Why? It is, as he said in *Beyond Good and Evil*, because "to perish from absolute knowledge might be a basic characteristic of existence."⁴ And yet he showed in *Ecce Homo* how he was near this absolute knowledge which makes up a part of the foundation of Being [*fondement de l'Être*]—likewise, during Autumn, 1888 in Turin.

If one deciphers in the correspondence of Freud his constant anxiety from the moment when he discovered psychoanalysis, we can wonder whether the experience of Freud is not, at bottom, quite similar to that of Nietzsche. What is in question at the breaking point of interpretation, in this convergence of interpretation toward a point that renders it impossible, could well be something like the experience of madness—experience against which Nietzsche struggled and by which he was fascinated, experience against which Freud himself, all his life, had wrestled, not without anguish. This experience of madness would be the penalty for a movement of interpretation which approached the infinity of its center, and which collapsed, calcinated.

I believe that this essential incompleteness of interpretation is linked to two other equally fundamental principles, and with the two former ones that I have just mentioned, would constitute the postulates of modern hermeneutics. This one first: if interpretation can never be brought to an end, it is simply because there is nothing to interpret. There is nothing absolutely primary to interpret, because at bottom everything is already interpretation [*tout est déjà interprétation*]. Each sign is in itself not the thing that presents itself to interpretation, but the interpretation of other signs.

There is never, if you will, an *interpretandum* which is not already an *interpretans*, so that there is established in interpretation a relation of violence as much as of elucidation. In fact, interpretation does not illuminate an interpretive topic that would offer itself passively to it; it can only violently seize an interpretation already there, which it must reverse, return, shatter with blows of a hammer. This is seen already in the works of Marx, which do not interpret the history of relations of production, but which interpret a relation that, inasmuch as it presents itself as nature, is already giving itself as an interpretation. Likewise, Freud does not interpret signs, but interpretations. Indeed, what does Freud discover under symptoms? He does not discover, as one says, "traumatism"—he brings to light fantasies, with their burden of anguish, that is to say, a nucleus which is already itself, in its own being, an interpretation. Anorexia, for example, is not sent

back [*renvoie*] to weaning, as the signifier would refer [*renverrait*] to the signified; but anorexia as sign, as symptom to interpret, refers to the fantasies of the false maternal breast, which is itself an interpretation, which is already in itself a speaking body. That is why Freud did not have to interpret what his patients offered to him as symptoms in language other than that of his patients; his interpretation is the interpretation of an interpretation, in the terms in which that interpretation is given. It is well known that Freud invented the "superego" [*"surmoi"*] the day when a patient said to him "I sense a dog over me" ["je sens un chien sur moi"].

In the same way, Nietzsche makes himself master of interpretations which have already seized one another. There is no original signified for Nietzsche. Words themselves are nothing other than interpretations; throughout their history, they interpret before being signs, and in the long run they signify only because they are only essential interpretations. Look at the famous etymology of *agathos*.⁵ This is also what Nietzsche says when he says that words have always been invented by the upper classes: they do not indicate a signified; they impose an interpretation. Therefore it is not because there are primary and enigmatic signs that we are now dedicated [*voués*] to the task of interpretation, but because there are interpretations, because beneath everything they never stop being that which expresses the great texture of violent interpretations. This is the reason that there are signs, signs which prescribe to us the interpretation of their interpretation, which prescribe to us their reversal as signs. In this sense, it can be said that *Allegoria*, *Hyponoia*, are at the foundation of language and before it, not what are slid under the words afterwards [*non pas ce qui s'est glissé après coup sous les mots*] in order to displace them and make them vibrate, but what give birth to words, what cause them to shine with a brilliance that is never fixed. This is also why, in the works of Nietzsche, the interpreter is the "truthful one" [*"véridique"*]; he is the "genuine one" [*"véritable"*], not because he makes himself master of a sleeping truth in order to utter it, but because he declares the interpretation that all truth has the function of concealing. Perhaps this preeminence of interpretation in relation to signs is what is most decisive in modern hermeneutics.

The idea that interpretation precedes the sign implies that the sign may not be simple and benevolent being, as was still the case in the sixteenth century, when the plethora of signs—the fact that things were alike—simply proved the benevolence of God, and only a transparent veil separated the sign from the signified. On the other hand, from the nineteenth century on, beginning with Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche, it seems to me that the sign is going to become malevolent. I mean that there is in the sign an ambiguous quality and a slight suspicion of ill will and "malice." Moreover, insofar as the sign is already an interpretation which is not given

use

No bottom
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Rouille

as such, signs are interpretations which try to justify themselves, and not the reverse.

Thus functions money as one sees it defined in the *Critique of Political Economy*, and above all in the first book of *Capital*. Symptoms also function in the same way in the works of Freud. And in the works of Nietzsche, words, justice, the binary classification of Good and Evil, that is to say, signs, are masks. By acquiring this new function of covering up [*recouvrement*, recovery] the interpretation, the sign loses its simple being as signifier that it still possessed at the time of the Renaissance. Its own thickness comes almost to open itself, and all the negative concepts which had until then remained foreign to the theory of the sign can rush into the opening. This theory had known only the transparent moment and the negative penalty [*peine*] of the veil. Now the whole play of negative concepts, contradictions, oppositions, in short, the ensemble of that play of reactive forces that Deleuze has analyzed so well in his book on Nietzsche⁶ has the power to organize itself in the interior of the sign.

"To put the dialectic back on its feet": if this expression must have a meaning, is it not to have justly replaced in the thickness of the sign, in that open, gaping space without end, in that space without real content or reconciliation, all this play of negativity that the dialectic finally uncapped in giving to it a positive sense?

Finally, the last characteristic of hermeneutics: interpretation finds itself before the obligation of interpreting itself endlessly, of always correcting itself. From here, two important consequences follow. The first is that interpretation will be henceforth always interpretation by the "who?": one does not interpret what there is in the signified, but one interprets, fundamentally, who has posed the interpretation. The origin [*principe*] of interpretation is nothing other than the interpreter, and this is perhaps the sense that Nietzsche gave to the word "psychology." The second consequence is that interpretation always has to interpret itself, and it cannot fail to return to itself. In opposition to the age of signs, which is a time when payments fall due, and in opposition to the age of the dialectic, which despite everything is linear, one has an age of interpretation which is circular. This age is obliged to pass again where it has already passed, which on the whole makes that the only danger which interpretation really runs; but it is a supreme danger, for it is paradoxically the signs which make it run the risk. The death of interpretation is to believe that there are signs, signs that exist primarily, originally, actually, like coherent, pertinent, and systematic marks.

The life of interpretation, on the contrary, is to believe that there is nothing but interpretations. It seems to me that one must understand well

that which many of our contemporaries forget, that *hermeneutics and semiology are two ferocious enemies.* A hermeneutic that in fact winds itself around a semiology, believing in the absolute existence of signs, gives up the violence, the incompleteness, the infinity of interpretations, so as to create a reign of terror where the mark rules [*régner la terreur de l'indice*] and suspects language—we recognize here Marxism after Marx. On the other hand, a hermeneutic that envelopes around itself this intermediate region of madness and pure language enters into the domain of languages that never stop implicating themselves—it is there that we recognize Nietzsche.

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Notes

*Originally published as "Nietzsche, Freud, Marx," in *Nietzsche, Cahiers du Royaumont* (Paris: Les Éditions du Minuit, 1964), pp. 183–92.—ED.

1. The "round table" Foucault refers to was a discussion held during the Seventh International Philosophical Colloquium at Royaumont, July 4–8, 1964. At the Colloquium on Nietzsche, papers were presented by Foucault, Jean Beaufret, Henri Birault, Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, Gilles Deleuze, Edouard Gaéde, Danko Grlic, Pierre Klossowski, Karl Löwith, Gabriel Marcel, Herbert W. Reichert, Boris de Schloezer, Gianni Vattimo, and Jean Wahl.—TRANS.

2. Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, Section 446.

3. The reference to Perseus appears in the preface to the first German edition of *Capital*.—TRANS.

4. Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Section 39. [The German text, which reads "ja es könnte selbst zur Grundbeschaffenheit des Daseins gehören, dass man an seiner völligen Erkenntnis zugrunde ginge," is quoted by Foucault from the French translation as "périr par la connaissance absolue pourrait bien faire partie du fondement de l'être."—TRANS.]

5. Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Essay One, Sections 4 and 5.

6. Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche et la philosophie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1962). English translation: *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, translated by Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).—TRANS.

7. See, for example, the definition of "psychology" as "morphology and the doctrine of the development of the will to power" in *Beyond Good and Evil*, Section 23.—TRANS.

