Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight
Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Culture

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Beyond Oedipus:
The Specimen Story
of Psychoanalysis

I

"We are forever telling stories about ourselves," writes Roy Schafer in an essay that suggestively defines the crux of the relation between psychoanalysis and narration, between the daily practice of telling stories and the narrative experience at stake in the practice of psychoanalysis:

We are forever telling stories about ourselves. In telling these stories to others, we may . . . be said to perform straightforward narrative actions. In saying that we also tell them to ourselves, however, we are enclosing one story within another . . . On this view, the self is a telling . . .

Additionally, we are forever telling stories about others . . . we narrate others just as we narrate ourselves . . . Consequently, telling "others" about "ourselves" is doubly narrative.

Often the stories we tell about ourselves are life-historical or autobiographical; we locate them in the past. For example, we might say, "Until I was fifteen, I was proud of my father" or "I had a totally miserable childhood." These histories are present tellings. The same may be said of the histories we attribute to others. We change many aspects of these histories of self and others as we change, for better or worse, the implied or stated questions to which they are the answers. Personal development may be characterized as change in the questions it is urgent or essential to answer. As a project in personal
development, personal analysis changes the leading questions that one addresses to the tale of one's life and the lives of important others.¹

Freud indeed changed our understanding of the leading questions underlying his patients' stories. The constitution of psychoanalysis, however, was motivated not just in the patients' need to tell their stories, nor even merely in Freud's way of changing the essential questions that those narrative complaints addressed, but in Freud's unprecedented transformation of narration into theory. In transforming, thus, not just the questions of the story but the very status of the narrative, in investing the idiosyncrasies of narrative with the generalizing power of a theoretical validity, Freud had a way of telling stories—of telling stories about others and of telling others stories about himself—that made history.

My dear Wilhelm,

My self-analysis is the most important thing I have in hand, and promises to be of the greatest value to me, when it is finished... If the analysis goes on as I expect, I shall write it all out systematically and lay the results before you. So far I have found nothing completely new, but all the complication to which I am used... Only one idea of general value has occurred to me. I have found love of the mother and jealousy of the father in my own case too, and now believe it to be a general phenomenon of early childhood... If that is the case, the gripping power of Oedipus Rex... becomes intelligible... The Greek myth seizes on a compulsion which everyone recognizes because he has felt traces of it in himself. Every member of the audience was once a budding Oedipus in phantasy, and this dream-fulfilment played out in reality causes everyone to recoil in horror, with the full measure of repression which separates his infantile from his present state.²

What Is a Key Narrative?

“Only one idea of general value has occurred to me. I have found love of the mother and jealousy of the father in my own case too.” From the Letters to Fliess to The Interpretation of Dreams, what Freud is instituting is a new way of writing one's autobiography, by transforming personal narration into a pathbreaking theoretical discovery. In the constitution of the theory, however, the discovery that emerges out of the narration is itself referred back to a story that confirms it: the literary drama of the destiny of Oedipus, which, in becoming thus a reference or key narrative—the specimen story of psychoanalysis—situates the validating moment at which the psychoanalytic storytelling turns and returns upon itself, in the unprecedented Freudian narrative-discursive space in which narration becomes theory.

This discovery is confirmed by a legend which has come down to us from classical antiquity: a legend whose profound and universal power to move can only be understood if the hypothesis I have put forward in regard to the psychology of children has an equally universal validity. What I have in mind is the legend of King Oedipus and Sophocles’ drama which bears his name...

The action of the play consists in nothing other than the process of revealing, with cunning delays and ever-mounting excitement—a process that can be likened to the work of a psycho-analysis—that Oedipus himself is the murderer of Laius, but further that he is the son of the murdered man and of Jocasta...

If Oedipus Rex moves a modern audience no less than it did the contemporary Greek one... there must be something which makes a voice within us ready to recognize the compelling force of destiny in the Oedipus... His destiny moves us because it might have been ours—because the oracle laid the same curse upon us before our birth as upon him. It is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father. Our dreams convince us that this is so. King Oedipus, who slew his father Laius and married his mother Jocasta, merely shows us the fulfilment of our childhood wishes... While the poet... brings to light the guilt of Oedipus, he is at the same time compelling us to recognize our own inner minds, in which those same impulses, though suppressed, are still to be found. (SE 4.261–263)

Freud's reference to the Oedipus as a key narrative is structured by three questions that support his analytical interrogation:
The question of the effectiveness of the story. Why is the story so compelling? How to account for the story's practical effect on the audience—its power to elicit affect, its symbolic efficacy?

The question of the recognition. The story has power over us because it “is compelling us to recognize” something in ourselves. What is it that the story is compelling us to recognize? What is at stake in the recognition?

The question of the validity of the hypothesis or theory. “A legend whose profound and universal power to move can only be understood if the hypothesis I have put forward in regard to the psychology of children has an equally universal validity.”

Any further inquiry into the significance of the Oedipus story in psychoanalytic theory and practice, would have to take into account the implications of those three questions: the narrative's practical efficacy (and hence, its potential for a clinical efficacy: its practical effect on us, having to do not necessarily with what the story means but with what it does to us); the meaning of the theoretical recognition (what do we recognize when we recognize the Oedipus?); and the very status of the theoretical validation through a narrative, that is, the question of the relationship between truth and fiction in psychoanalysis.

I would suggest now that Lacan's reading of Freud renews each of these questions in some crucial ways; and that an exploration of this renewal—an exploration of the way in which the Oedipus mythic reference holds the key to a Lacanian psychoanalytic understanding—may hold the key in turn to the crux of Lacan's innovative insight into what Freud discovered and, consequently, into what psychoanalysis is all about.

The Complexity of the Complex

Nowhere in Lacan's writings is there any systematic exposition of his specific understanding of the significance of Oedipus. As is often the case, Lacan's insight has to be derived, through a reading labor, from an elliptical and fragmentary text, from sporadic comments, from episodic highlights of (often critical and corrective) interpretations, and from the omnipresent literary usage of the reference to the Oedipus myth in Lacan's own rhetoric and style. My attempt at a creative systematization of what may be called Lacan's revision of the Oedipus mythic reference would organize itself, in a structure of its own, as a relation between three dimensions. (1) The purely theoretical dimension: How does Lacan understand the basic psychoanalytic concept of “the Oedipus complex”? (2) The practical and clinical dimension: What is, in Lacan's eyes, the practical relevance of Oedipus to the clinical event, to practical dealings with a patient? (3) The literary dimension: How does Lacan understand the way in which Sophocles' text informs psychoanalytic knowledge?

Traditionally, the Oedipus complex is understood to mean the literal genesis and the literal objects of man's primordial desire: an incestuous sexual love for the mother and a jealous, murderous impulse toward the father. In this view, what Freud discovered in the Oedipus is a universal answer to the question: What does man unconsciously desire? This answer guarantees a knowledge—psychoanalytic knowledge—of the instinctual content of the human unconscious, which can be found everywhere. Any Freudian reading is bound to uncover the same meaning, the ultimate signified of human desire: the Oedipus complex.

This is not the way Lacan understands the gist of Freud's discovery. For Lacan, the Oedipus complex is not a signed but a signer, not a meaning but a structure. What Freud discovered in the Oedipus myth is not an answer but the structure of a question, not any given knowledge but a structuring positioning of the analyst's own ignorance of his patient's unconscious. “If it is true,” writes Lacan, “that our knowledge comes to the rescue of the ignorance of the analysand, it is no less true that we too are plunged in ignorance, insofar as we are ignorant of the symbolic constellation underlying the unconscious of the subject. In addition, this constellation always has to be conceived as structured, and structured according to an order which is complex” (S 1:78–79). What is essential, in Lacan's eyes, is the key word “complex” in the notion of the Oedipus complex. The fecundity of Freud's paradigmatic schema lies precisely in its irreducible complexity.

When we go toward the discovery of the unconscious, what we encounter are situations which are structured, organized, complex. Of these situations, Freud has given us the first model, the standard, in the Oedipus complex ... [What we have to realize is] the extent to which the Oedipus complex poses problems, and how many ambiguities it encompasses. The
whole development of analysis, in fact, was brought about by the successive emphases placed upon each of the tensions implied in this triangular system. This alone forces us to see in it an altogether different thing than this massive bloc summed up by the classical formula—sexual desire for the mother, rivalry with the father. (S 1.79)

The triangular structure, crucial to Lacan’s conception, is not the simple psychological triangle of love and rivalry, but a socio-symbolic structural positioning of the child in a complex constellation of alliance (family, elementary social cell) in which the combination of desire and a Law prohibiting desire is regulated, through a linguistic structure of exchange, into a repetitive process of replacement—of substitution—of symbolic objects (substitutes) of desire.

In this symbolic constellation, the mother’s function differs from the father’s function. The mother (or the mother’s image) stands for the object of the child’s narcissistic attachment (an object and an image of the child’s self-love, or love for his own body—for his own image), inaugurating a type of mirroring relationship that Lacan calls “the Imaginary.” The father (or the father’s name), as a symbol of the Law of incest prohibition, stands on the other hand for the first authoritative “no,” the first social imperative of renunciation, inaugurating, through this castration of the child’s original desire, both the necessity of repression and the process of symbolic substitution of objects of desire, which Lacan calls “the Symbolic.” While the child is learning how to speak, signifiers of incestuous desire are repressed, become unspeakable, and the desire is displaced onto substitutive signifiers of desire. This is what the Oedipus complex mythically, schematically, accounts for: the constitution of the Symbolic, through the coincidence of the child’s introduction into language and of the constitution of his (linguistic) unconscious.

The triangularity of the Oedipal structure is thus crucial in Lacan’s perception in that it implies a radical asymmetry between the Imaginary (archetypal relation to the mother) and the Symbolic (archetypal relation to the structure of alliance between mother, father, and child). The Imaginary is the dual perspective (narcissistic mirroring, exchangeability of self and other); the Symbolic is the triangular perspective. Both are encompassed by the Oedipal struc-
ture and will continue to define different registers of human experience and relationships.

You are familiar with the profoundly asymmetrical character . . . of each of the dual relations which the Oedipal structure encompasses. The relation which links the subject to the mother is distinct from the relation which links him to the father, the narcissistic or imaginary relation to the father is distinct from the symbolic relation, and is also distinct from the relation which we must call real—and which is residual with respect to the architecture which interests us in analysis. All this is enough of a demonstration of the complexity of the structure. (S 1.79)

What matters, in Lacan’s perception of the Oedipus as constitutive of the qualitative difference between the Imaginary and the Symbolic, is the fact that the triangularity of the Symbolic narratively functions as the story of the subversion of the duality of the Imaginary. The Oedipus drama mythically epitomizes the subversion of the mirroring illusion through the introduction of a difference in the position of a Third: Father, Law, Language, the reality of death, all of which Lacan designates as the Other, constitutive of the unconscious (otherness to oneself) in that it is both subversive of, and radically ex-centric to, the narcissistic, specular relation of self to other and of self to self.

II

The Clinical Event

In his first Seminar, Lacan reviews a clinical case history reported by Melanie Klein. The reinterpretation he then offers of Klein’s narrative sheds light not just on his particular conception of the Oedipus, but on the clinical relevance of this theoretical conception to psychoanalytic practice. First I will sum up the case by quoting from Klein’s own report.

[The case] is that of a four-year-old boy who, as regards the poverty of his vocabulary and of his intellectual attainments, was on the level of a child of about . . . eighteen months . . . This child, Dick, was largely devoid of affects, and
he was indifferent to the presence or absence of mother or nurse. From the very beginning he had only rarely displayed anxiety, and that in an abnormally small degree... He had almost no interests, did not play, and had no contact with his environment. For the most part he simply strung sounds in a meaningless way... When he did speak he generally used his meagre vocabulary in an incorrect way. But it was not that he was unable to make himself intelligible: he had no wish to do so...

[In the first visit] he had let his nurse go without manifesting any emotion, and had followed me into the room with complete indifference... just as if I were a piece of furniture... Dick's behaviour had had no meaning or purpose, nor was any affect or anxiety associated with it...

But he was interested in trains and stations and also in door-handles, doors and the opening and shutting of them...

I took a big train and put it beside a smaller one and called them 'Daddy train' and 'Dick-train.' Thereupon he picked up the train I called "Dick" and made it roll to the window and said "Station." I explained: "The station is mummy; Dick is going into mummy." Meantime he picked up the train again, but soon ran back into the space between the doors. While I was saying that he was going into dark mummy, he said twice in a questioning way: "Nurse?" I answered: "Nurse is soon coming," and this he repeated and used the words later quite correctly, retaining them in his mind... In the third analytic hour he behaved in the same way, except that besides running into the hall and between the doors, he also ran behind the chest of drawers. There he was seized with anxiety, and for the first time called me to him... We see that simultaneously with the appearance of anxiety there had emerged a sense of dependence... and at the same time he began to be interested in the soothing words "Nurse is coming soon" and, contrary to his usual behaviour, had repeated and remembered them...

It had been possible for me to gain access to Dick's unconscious by getting into contact with such rudiments of phantasy-life and symbol-formation as he displayed. The result was a diminution of his latent anxiety, so that it was possible for a certain amount of anxiety to become manifest. But this implied that the working-over of this anxiety was beginning by way of the establishment of a symbolic relation to things and objects, and at the same time his epistemophilia and aggressive impulses were set in action. Every advance was followed by the release of fresh quantities of anxiety and led to his turning away to some extent from the things with which he had already established an affective relation and which had therefore become objects of anxiety. As he turned away from these he turned towards new objects and his aggressive... impulses were directed to these new affective relations in their turn... He then transferred his interest from them to fresh things... As his interests developed he at the same time enlarged his vocabulary, for he now began to take more and more interest not only in the things themselves but in their names...

Hand in hand with this development of interests and an increasingly strong transference to myself, the hitherto lacking object-relation has made its appearance...

In general I do not interpret the material until it has found expression in various representations. In this case, however, where the capacity to represent it was almost entirely lacking, I found myself obliged to make my interpretations on the basis of my general knowledge... Finding access in this way to his unconscious, I succeeded in activating anxiety and other affects. The representations then became fuller and I soon acquired a more solid foundation for the analysis. (pp. 238-246)

What Lacan seeks to understand in Klein's narrative is, specifically, her clinical usage of Oedipus in the originating moment of the therapeutic intervention. This clinical usage, however, strikes him as highly problematic and ambiguous. Lacan is shocked by the reductive crudity of the initial Oedipal interpretation and, as a clinician, disapproves in principle of such "symbolic extrapolations" (S 1.101), of interpretations having the character of a mechanical imposition by the interpreter. And yet this crude originating moment turns out to have been clinically insightful, since it brought about a spectacular therapeutic process. How can that be understood?

She sticks symbolism into him, little Dick, with the utmost brutality, that Melanie Klein! She begins right away by hitting him with the major interpretations. She throws him into a
brutal verbalization of the Oedipus myth, almost as revolting to us as to any reader whatever—You are the little train, you want to fuck your mother.

This procedure obviously lends itself to theoretical discussions ... But it is certain that, as a result of this intervention, something happens. This is what it's all about ...

This text is precious because it is the text of a therapist, of a woman of experience. She senses things, she cannot be blamed if she cannot always articulate what she senses. (S 1.81)

We have to take Melanie Klein's text for what it is, namely, the account of an experience. (S 1.95)

How does one read, how does one listen to, the practical account of an experience? Lacan's reply is: as an analyst, as a practitioner. Indeed, the paradox of the clinical success of a reductive, elementary interpretation, not only triggers Lacan's interest, but actively enhances his attention to a level that is properly, for him, the analytic level. As a clinician, Lacan is always listening, in the discourse that recounts an experience, for its discrepancies, its ambiguities, its paradoxes. The analytic path is always opened up by something that resists, something that disrupts the continuity of conscious meaning and appears to be incomprehensible.

What counts, when one attempts to elaborate an experience, is less what one does understand than what one does not understand ... Commenting on a text is the same as doing an analysis. How many times have I pointed it out to those I supervise when they say to me—I thought I understood what he meant to say was this, or that—one of the things we should be watching out for most, is not to understand too much, not to understand more than what there is in the discourse of the subject. Interpreting is an altogether different thing than having the fancy of understanding. One is the opposite of the other. I will even say that it is on the basis of a certain refusal of understanding that we open the door onto psychoanalytic understanding. (S 1.87–88)

It is indeed on the basis of Lacan's own analytical refusal of understanding—both of the apparently transparent meaning of the Oedipal clinical intervention and of what it is that Klein does understand—that Lacan will shed new light, both on what the Oedipus myth and on what the clinical event are all about.

In much the same way as Freud, dealing with Oedipus, interrogates specifically the practical effect, the narrative efficacy, of the myth, Lacan, withholding understanding of the meaning of Klein's Oedipal intervention, interrogates specifically its narrative-symbolic efficacy: its productive practical and clinical effect. Why is the story of Oedipus—in the clinical experience as in literature—so effective? The question here again is not what does the story mean, but what does the story do? Not what is the clinician's statement, but what is the clinical significance, the actual principle of functioning, of her performance? Suspending thus what Klein believes she understands, Lacan asks: What is it that Klein does? What does the clinical event—the clinical advent—consist of? What happens, in effect, with Dick?

What then has Melanie Klein in effect done? (S 1.99)

What is the specific function of the Kleinian interpretation which presents itself with this character of intrusion, of imposition on the subject? (S 1.88)

- Projection/Introjection:
  The Clinical Intervention

In her own account of what happens in the therapeutic process, Melanie Klein talks about Dick's development in terms of his projections and his introjections:

As his analysis progressed it became clear that in thus throwing [objects] out of the room he was indicating an expulsion, both of the damaged object and of his own sadism ... which was in this manner projected into the external world. Dick had also discovered the wash-basin as symbolizing the mother's body, and he displayed an extraordinary dread of being wetted with water. He anxiously wiped it off his hand and mine, which he had dipped in as well as his own, and immediately afterwards he showed the same anxiety when urinating. Urine and faeces represented to him injurious and dangerous substances.

It became clear that in Dick's phantasy faeces, urine and
penis stood for objects with which to attack the mother’s body, and were therefore felt to be a source of injury to himself as well. These phantasies contributed to his dread of the contents of his mother’s body, and especially of his father’s penis which he phantasied as being in her womb. We came to see this phantasied penis and a growing feeling of aggression against it in many forms, the desire to eat and destroy it being specially prominent. For example, on one occasion Dick lifted a toy man to his mouth, gnashed his teeth and said “Tea Daddy,” by which he meant “Eat Daddy.” He then asked for a drink of water. The introjection of his father’s penis proved to be associated with the dread both of it, as of a primitive, harm-inflicting super-ego, and of being punished by the mother thus robbed: dread, that is, of the external and the introjected objects. (pp. 243–244)

It should be remembered that, in Klein’s conception, the child’s mental universe is produced as a relation to a container—his mother’s body—and to the imagined contents of this container. During the progress of his instinctual relationship with his mother, the child proceeds through a series of imaginary incorporations. He can, for example, bite or absorb his mother’s body: the style of this incorporation implies the destruction of the object incorporated. Within the maternal body, on the other hand, the child expects to encounter a certain number of objects that he projects as dangerous, because he imaginarily invests them with the same capacity for destruction that he experiences in himself. This is why he will need to emphasize their exteriority by expelling them, rejecting them as dangerous entities, bad objects, feces. But still they will appear threatening to him. In order, then, to overcome the threat, the child will reincorporate or introject the dangerous objects, substituting other objects toward which he will deflect his interest. Different objects of the external world, gradually more diversified and more neutralized, will emerge as the equivalents of the first. These imaginary equations between objects will thus produce, in the child’s mental functioning, an alternative mechanism of projection and introjection, expulsion and absorption: an imaginary play between contents and container, inside and outside, inclusions and exclusions.

It would seem that the mechanisms of projection and introjec-

tion, based as they are on the play of symmetry (the mirroring, reversibility, and exchangeability) between inside and outside, are themselves basically symmetrical, inverted mirror images of each other. In her account of Dick’s alternative projections and introjections, Klein seems to use the terms in this oppositional-symmetric way, which is in fact the way they are routinely understood in psychoanalytic theory.

Lacan, however, points out a radical asymmetry between projection and introjection, and this asymmetry, in his view, holds the key to the very essence of the therapeutic process and is thus crucial to an understanding of what Klein does as a clinician.

Dick plays with the container and the contents... He envisions himself as a little train... The dark space is immediately assimilated to the inside of his mother’s body, in which he takes refuge. What does not happen is the free play, the conjunction between the different forms—real and imaginary—of the objects...

We are here in a mirroring relation. We call it the level of projection. But how should we indicate the correlative of projection? It is necessary to find another term than introjection. In the way we use it in analysis, introjection is not the opposite of projection. It is practically employed, you will notice, only when what is at stake is symbolic introjection. It is always accompanied by a symbolic denomination. Introjection is always the introjection of the discourse of the Other, and this fact introduces a dimension altogether different from the dimension of projection. It is around this distinction that you can separate, and see the difference, between the function of the ego, which is of the order of the dual register, and the function of the superego [pertaining to the triangular register].

(S 197)

In other words, projection is identified by Lacan with what he calls the (dual) order of the Imaginary. Introjection is understood as pertaining to the (triangular) order of the Symbolic. Projection and introjection are not symmetrical because there is a qualitative difference between the Imaginary and the Symbolic. What the therapist does is to introduce this qualitative difference into the child’s life, to introduce Dick into the Symbolic (into a symbolic world whereby difference is articulated in a linguistic system), by pro-
moting in the child, all at once, the capacity of **speaking** and the capacity of **substituting** objects of desire, thus permitting him to articulate reality into a symbolic network of differentiated meanings and differentiated object relations.

You have noticed the lack of contact which Dick experiences... This is why Melanie Klein distinguishes him from the neurotics, because of his profound indifference, his apathy, his absence. It is clear, in fact, that in Dick what is not symbolized is reality. This young subject is entirely in crude reality, reality unconstituted. He is entirely in the undifferentiated. (§ 1.81)

Anxiety is what is not produced in this subject... In Melanie Klein's office, there is for Dick neither other nor self; there is reality pure and simple. The interval between two doors is his mother's body. The trains and all the rest are something, without doubt, but something which is neither nameable nor named.

It is against this background that Melanie Klein, with this brute's instinct which characterizes her and which has, incidentally, made her perforate a sum of knowledge hitherto impenetrable, dares speak to him—speak to a being who... in the symbolic sense of the term, does not answer. He is there as if she did not exist, as if she were a piece of furniture. And nevertheless she speaks to him. She literally gives name to what—until then has been, for this subject, nothing but reality pure and simple—certainly, he already has a certain apprehension of some syllables, but... he does not assume them. (§ 1.82–83)

What drives a child to assume—that is, to endorse, make his, to take upon himself—the vocabular of language? In Lacan's conception, the Symbolic—the desire and ability to symbolize—hinges on the more fundamental **need to call:** the need to address the other, to attempt to draw the attention of the other toward something that the caller, the addressor, lacks.

If we sum up everything that Melanie Klein describes of Dick's attitude, the significant point is simply this—the child does not address any call to anybody.

The call takes its value within a system of language which is already acquired. Now, what is here at stake is that this child emits no call. The system by means of which the subject comes to situate himself in language is interrupted, at the level of speech. Speech and language are not the same; this child is, to a certain extent, master of language, but he does not speak. It is a subject who is there and who, literally, does not answer.

Speech has not come to him. Language has not encroached on his imaginary system... For him, the Real and the Imaginary are the same...

Melanie Klein does not proceed here—and she is aware of it—to any interpretation. She starts out, as she tells us, with ideas that she has, and which are known... Let me make no bones about it, I tell Dick, Dick—little train, Daddy—big train. Thereupon, the child begins to play with his little train, and he says the word **station.** This is a crucial moment, in which what is beginning to take place is the encroachment of language on the imaginary of the subject.

Melanie Klein sends him back this—**The station is mummy; Dick is going into mummy.** As of this moment, everything is set in motion. She will give him only statements of this kind, and not others. And very quickly the child progresses. It's a fact.

What then has Melanie Klein in effect done? Nothing other than to provide verbalization. She has symbolized an effective relation, the relation of a being, named, with another. She has applied—indeed mechanically imposed—the symbolization of the Oedipus myth, to call it by its name. It is as a result of that that, after a first ceremony in which the child seeks shelter in the dark space in order to renew contact with the container, something new awakens in him.

The child verbalizes a first call—a spoken call. He asks for his nurse, with whom he had entered and whose departure he had taken as though nothing were the matter. For the first time, he produces a reaction of appeal, of call—a call which is not just an emotional address... but a verbalized address, and which henceforth entails an answer.

Things develop consequently to a point where, in a situation henceforth organized, Melanie Klein can bring about the intervention of other situational elements, including that of the
father, who comes to play his role. Outside of the sessions, Klein tells us, the relationships of the child develop on the level of the Oedipus. The child symbolizes the reality surrounding him out of this kernel, of this palpitating cell of symbolism which Melanie Klein has provided him with.

This is what she calls, later on, “having opened the doors of his unconscious.” (§ 198–100)

The important point, in Lacan’s account of the clinical event, is the following: the initial sentence of the clinician (“Dick—little train, Daddy—big train, Dick is going into mummy”) does not function constatively (as a truth report, with respect to the reality of the situation) but performatively (as a speech act). The success of the interpretation, its clinical efficacy, does not proceed from the accuracy of its meaning (“You want to fuck your mother”) but from the way this discourse of the Other situates the child, in language, in relation to the people who surround him, are close to him. This is what the Oedipal intervention is all about. “Melanie Klein does not proceed here to any interpretation,” insists Lacan.

What the preconceived and heavy-handed interpretation does is to give the child—through the verbalized Oedipal constellation—not a meaning but a structure, a linguistic structure by which to relate himself to other human beings; a structure, therefore, in which meaning—sexual meaning—can later be articulated and inscribed.

Let me try to recapitulate the complexity of Lacan’s restatement of Klein’s clinical account, by stating Lacan’s insight in my own terms. After Klein, after Lacan, in the space of insight opened up by the (analytic?) dialogue between their different terminologies, I will sum up in yet another narrative voice the crux of the encounter between Dick and Oedipus.

- The Story of the Introduction of a Difference

Dick’s recovery is the story of his development, his passage, from projection to introjection, from the Imaginary to the Symbolic, from a stage that precedes the primary identification of the “mirror stage,” to a stage in which the secondary identification of the Oedi-
Oedipal triangle and brings about Dick's secondary (Oedipal) identification. Here is what happens:

**I. Primary Identification** (Imaginary realm of the Mirror Stage)

Projection

here = there
inside = outside
container = contents
my body = my mother’s body
self = other

Two elements are seen as equivalent from the point of view of one of the elements (visual metaphors, specular fascination).

**II. Secondary Identification** (Oedipus, introduction into the Symbolic realm)

Introjection

Incorporation of the father’s name, constitution of superego

Setting in motion of the mechanism of repression through a chain of displacement of signifiers

Dick is to Mummy what Daddy is to Mummy

“Little train” is to “station” what “big train” is to “station”

“A” is to “B” what “C” is to “B”

Me:mother :: father:mother

A:B :: C:B

The equivalence is not between two objects but between two relations, in which the substitution of A (Dick) and C (Daddy) is not accomplished by resemblance (projective identity) but by a parallel position in a structure (metonymy, desire).

How should we account now for the salutary emergence of Dick’s anxiety? **Anxiety is linked to the Symbolic:** it is the way in which the introjection of the symbolic system as a whole makes itself felt in the subject, when any element in it is disturbed or displaced. There is no relation at first for Dick between the train and the space between the doors, until Klein establishes—through discourse—this relation. The rising anxiety in Dick embodies his nascent intuition that, in a symbolic system, any element or change has repercussions in the whole. Dick thus develops anxiety, as he passes from **indifference** (everything is equally real) to **difference** (everything is not equally real; there is imaginary; where the imaginary is, is undecidable).

Dick’s story is thus Oedipal, in that it is at one and the same time the story of the child’s birth into symbolism (language), the story of the human genesis of anxiety (and thus of meaning), and the story of the introduction of articulated difference.

**The Advent of Difference**

Difference emerges and is articulated as **sexual difference**. Everything is not the same. A change in any element changes the givens of a situation. The subject is subject to the givens of his situation, starting with the fact that his sex is one sex and not another.

Anxiety occurs with the assumption of difference (castration), not simply because of the imaginary fear that something (death, or loss of bodily integrity) might happen to the subject, but because of the symbolic recognition that, since everything is not the same and since every disturbance is reverberated in the whole symbolic constellation, the situational givens that affect the subject do make a difference (meaning).

**The Analytical Speech Act**

““It had been possible for me, in Dick’s analysis, to gain access to his unconscious,” writes Melanie Klein. What, asks Lacan, is the key—the practical, clinical key—to that access? Unlike Klein, who proposes as the key a whole cognitive theory of the child’s Oedipal sadism and of the maturation of his instincts, Lacan believes the key is not cognitive but performative.** The key is not in the clinician’s understanding, or her meaning, but in her actual speech act:

Is it not insofar as Melanie Klein speaks that something happens? (S 188)
She sticks symbolism into him, little Dick, with the utmost brutality... But it is certain that, as a result of this intervention, something happens. This is what it’s all about. (S 1.81)

What is at stake in this whole observation—what you have to understand—is the virtue of speech, insofar as the act of speech functions in coordination with a preestablished, typical, and in advance, significant, symbolic system. (S 1.103)

What does Klein’s speech act consist of if it works in the context of a preestablished, typical symbolic meaning? It consists precisely in effectively producing in the child the call that was lacking, the address that then becomes his motivation for the introjection of human discourse (language).

And how does Klein’s speech act produce the call in Dick? By calling him (“Dick—little train”), by naming him within the constellation of a symbolic structure, by thus performatively constituting him, through her own discourse, as a subject.

Ask yourselves what the call represents in the field of speech. It represents—the possibility of a refusal. (S 1.102)

But if I call the person to whom I am speaking by whatever name I choose to give him, I intimate to him the subjective function that he will take on again in order to reply to me, even if it is to repudiate this function. (E 300, N 86–87)

What I seek in speech is the response—the reply—of the other. What constitutes me as subject is my question. In order to be recognized by the other, I utter what was only in function of what will be. In order to find him, I call him by a name that he must assume or refuse in order to reply to me. (E 299, N 86; tm)

In order to find Dick, Klein calls him by a name that he must then acknowledge—assume or refuse in order to reply to her. And Dick indeed replies, first with a call and later with the articulation of his desire. But the call and the desire, the address and the response, the question and the answer, are not statements (meanings), but performances, speech acts. It is thus not on the level of its statements but on the level of its illocutionary forces that the anlyactic dialogue takes place between the therapist and Dick. But this is, in Lacan’s conception, the true thrust of any analytic dialogue: fundamentally, the dialogic psychoanalytic discourse is not so much informative as it is performative.

Whether it sees itself as an instrument of healing, of training, or of exploration in depth, psychoanalysis has but a single medium: the patient’s speech. That this is self-evident is no excuse for our neglecting it. Now, speech is what calls for a reply. (E 247, N 40; tm)

A reaction is not a reply... There is no reply except for my desire... There is no question except for my anticipation...

Henceforth, the decisive function of my own reply [as analyst] appears, and this function is not, as has been said, simply to be received by the subject as acceptance or rejection of his discourse, but really to recognize him or to abolish him as subject. Such is the responsibility of the analyst, each time he intervenes by means of speech. (E 300, N 86–87; tm; original italics)

■ The Analyst’s Responsibility, or the Function of Interpretation

Each time the analyst speaks, interprets in the analytic situation, he gives something asked of him. What he gives, however, is not a superior understanding, but a reply. The reply addresses not so much what the patient says (or means), but his call. Being fundamentally a reply to the subject’s question, to the force of his address, the interpretive gift is not constative (cognitive) but performative: the gift is not so much a gift of truth, of understanding or of meaning: it is, essentially, a gift of language. This is how Lacan accounts for the theoretical clarifications Freud gives to the Rat Man, when the patient had to be “guaranteed before pursuing his discourse”:

The extremely approximative character of the explanations with which Freud gratifies him, so approximative as to appear somewhat crude, is sufficiently instructive: at this point it is clearly not so much a question of doctrine, nor even of indoctrination, but rather of a symbolic gift of speech, pregnant with a secret pact. (E 291, N 78–79)
Speech is in effect a gift of language, and language is not immaterial. It is a subtle body, but body it is. (E 301, N 87)

If interpretation is a gift of language—that is, a reply to the analysand’s address—rather than a gift of truth, how does interpretation function? If, moreover, in Lacan’s conception, “the question of correctness” of the psychoanalytical interpretation “moves into the background” (E 300, N 87), how does the analyst’s interpretive intervention bring about the desired therapeutic, clinical effect? Lacan’s reply is twofold.

First, since the analyst’s interpretation has to be not necessarily correct but resonant (ambiguous, symbolically suggestive), since “we learn that analysis consists in playing in all the many stages of the score of speech in the registers of language” (E 291, N 79), “every spoken intervention is received by the subject in terms of his structure” (E 300, N 87). The stake of analysis is precisely to identify the symbolic structure in whose terms the interpretations are received, that is, to identify the structure into which the gift of language is translated, to identify the question in whose terms the reply is sought and heard.

The stake of analysis is nothing other than this—to recognize what function the subject assumes in the order of symbolic relations which cover the whole field of human relations, and of which the initial cell is the Oedipus complex, where the assumption of sex is decided. (S 1.80)

This is, then, the first Oedipal stake of analytical interpretation, whereby the analyst’s reply to the analysand is not an answer concerning the initial sexual or incestuous relations of the subject (the Oedipus as answer, as a meaning), but a search for the initial question of the subject (the Oedipus as question, as the constitutive speech act of the patient). Since any spoken intervention or interpretation is “received in terms of the subject’s structure,” the analytical reply thus seeks the structure of the subject’s question. This is what the Oedipus consists in, as an object of the analytical interpretation: it defines the analysand’s initial structure of address.

In order to know how to reply to the subject in analysis, the procedure is to recognize first of all the place where his ego is... in other words, to know through whom and for whom the subject poses his question. So long as this is not known,

there will be the risk of a misunderstanding concerning the desire that is there to be recognized and concerning the object to whom this desire is addressed. (E 303, N 89)

In her first spoken intervention, Melanie Klein, to return to her, has precisely defined this initial structure of address for Dick: “she has symbolized an effective relation, that of a being, named, with another” (S 1.100). Let us not forget, however, that Dick’s problem as a child was his failure to address: “If we sum up everything that Melanie Klein describes of Dick’s attitude, the significant point is simply this—the child does not address any call to anybody.” What Klein in effect does through her first spoken intervention (Oedipal interpretation) is thus not simply to identify the child’s initial structure of address, but to create it.

This brings us to the second Oedipal stake of the analyst’s spoken intervention and to the second function of interpretation in Lacan’s conception.

“Not only is every spoken intervention received by the subject in terms of his structure, but the intervention takes on a structuring function in him, by dint of its symbolic form” (E 301, N 87; tm). Thus not only is the analytic dialogue essentially performative (acting through its illocutionary force) rather than informative (acting through its statements or its meanings): the analytical interpretation in itself is a performative (not cognitive) interpretation in that it has a fundamental structuring, transforming function. If analysis is necessarily always a reference to some “other scene,” it is to the extent that it takes place on the performative, other scene of language.

For in its symbolizing function, the intimation of speech is moving towards nothing less than a transformation of the subject to whom it is addressed by means of the link that it establishes with the one who emits it—or, to put it differently, by means of the introduction of a signifier effect. (E 296, N 83; tm)

This is precisely what Klein has accomplished in the Dick case through her spoken intervention, in spite of the “brutality” of her “symbolic extrapolations.” The question then becomes how to account for the spectacular clinical success in spite of the symbolical extrapolation, in spite of what might be seen as the heavy-hand-
edness of the approach, in spite of the mechanical character of the interpretive intervention. Who, or what, is responsible for the therapy’s success?

■ The Unconscious Is the Discourse of the Other

Let me quote at some length the suggestive way in which Lacan specifically addresses the question of Klein’s clinical success:

In what way has Melanie Klein done anything whatsoever which manifests a grasp of any process whatsoever which would be, in the subject, his unconscious?

She admits it right away: she has done it—she has acted—out of habit. Reread this observation and you will see in it a spectacular demonstration of the formula I am always repeating to you—the unconscious is the discourse of the Other.

Here is a case in which it is absolutely manifest. In this subject (Dick), there is no unconscious whatsoever. It is Klein’s discourse which brutally grafts upon the initial egoistic inertia of the child the first symbolizations of the Oedipal situation . . .

In this dramatic case, in this subject who has not acceded to human reality because he emits no call, what are the effects of the symbolizations introduced by the therapist? They determine an initial position out of which the subject can put into play the imaginary and the real, and conquer his development . . .

The development takes place only insofar as the subject is integrated into a symbolic system, which he practices and in which he asserts himself through the exercise of an authentic speech. It is not even necessary, you will notice, for this speech to be his own. In the couple instantaneously formed—though in its least affective form—between the therapist and the subject, an authentic speech can be generated. Not any speech will do, of course—this is where we see the virtue of the symbolic situation of the Oedipus.

It is really the key—a very reduced key. I would think—as I have already indicated to you—that there is probably a whole set of keys . . . When we study mythology . . . we see that the Oedipus complex is but a tiny detail in an immense myth. The myth enables us to collate a series of relations between subjects, in comparison with whose complexity and wealth the Oedipus appears to be such an abridged edition that, in the final analysis, it is not always utilizable.

But no matter. We analysts have so far contented ourselves with it. We are totally mixed up, however, if we do not distinguish between the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real. (SL 100–101)

In this “reduced key” that Freud has named after the story of Oedipus, it is important to distinguish the Symbolic from the Real and from the Imaginary because psychoanalytic practice—that is, psychoanalytic work—has to do with the Symbolic. The narrative/symbolic efficacy of the Oedipal reference in the psychoanalytic situation and the therapeutic, practical felicity of the analyst’s speech act are accounted for by the resonant and enigmatic formula: “the unconscious is the discourse of the Other.” What, precisely, does that mean? And how, specifically, does this formula account for what happens in the Dick case?

In general, when Lacan repeats this formula, what he wants to emphasize, by way of “intimation,” are the following key points:

The unconscious is a discourse. Freud is not the first to have discovered the unconscious, but the first to have discovered the essential fact that the unconscious speaks: in slips of the tongue, in dreams, in the symbolic language of the symptoms. The unconscious is not simply a forgotten or rejected bag of instincts, but an indestructible infantile desire whose repression means that it has become symbolically unrecognizable, since it is differentially articulated through rhetorical displacements (object substitutions). Repression is, in other words, the rejection not of instincts but of symbols, or of signifiers: their rejection through their replacement, the displacement or the transference of their original libidinal meaning onto other signifiers.

The unconscious is a discourse that is other, or ex-centric, to the discourse of a self. It is in effect a discourse that is other to itself, not in possession of itself; a discourse that no consciousness can master and that no speaking subject can assume or own.

The unconscious is a discourse that is radically intersubjective. Since it is a discourse that no consciousness can own, the only way a consciousness can hear it is as coming from the Other. In this
way, the formula describes the analytic situation as coincident with the radical structure of the unconscious, that is, the analytic (dialogic) situation as the condition of possibility for the production of psychoanalytic truth (an audible speech of the unconscious). “The Other” thus stands in the psychoanalytic dialogue both for the position of the analyst, through whom the subject hears his own unconscious discourse, and for the position of the subject’s own unconscious, as other to his self (to his self-image and self-consciousness).

In language, our message comes to us from the Other, in a reverse form. (E 9)

The unconscious is that discourse of the Other by which the subject receives, in an inverted form, his own forgotten message. (E 439)

In what sense, then, does Lacan say that the Dick case is a spectacular demonstration of his formula of “the unconscious is the discourse of the Other?” Even as applied to this specific case, the Lacanian utterance has many resonances. In a first sense, it is in effect Klein’s discourse (her initial Oedipal interpretation) that actively constitutes Dick’s unconscious, that is, determines “an initial [symbolic] position out of which the subject can put into play the imaginary and the real, and conquer his development.” The constitution of Dick’s unconscious (the mental functioning necessitating and enabling the substitution of objects of desire) is coincident, moreover, with Dick’s own introduction into language—a language that precedes him and that comes to him from the Other (represented, here, by the therapist); a language that articulates a pre-established sociocultural symbolic system governed by a Law that structures relationships and into which Dick’s own relations must be inscribed.

The development takes place only insofar as the subject is integrated into a symbolic system, which he practices and in which he asserts himself through the exercise of an authentic speech. It is not even necessary, you will notice, for this speech to be his own.

For Dick, then, the unconscious is the discourse of the Other since it is, quite literally, constituted by Klein’s discourse.

But, whereas the key to Dick’s unconscious is in Klein’s performative interpretation, Klein’s interpretation is in turn not her own.

In what way has Melanie Klein done anything whatsoever which manifests a grasp of any process whatsoever which would be, in the subject, his unconscious?

She admits it right away: she has done it—she has acted—out of habit.

Klein has in effect done nothing other than “mechanically apply” (plaquer) “the symbolization of the Oedipus myth.” If Klein rejoins, thus, Dick’s unconscious, it is not because she truly understands its message or directly hears its discourse, but because she is herself inhabited by the discourse of the Other—inhabited by the discourse of the Oedipus myth—of which she is herself nothing but an unconscious medium when, at a loss with respect to any understanding of the child and “out of habit,” she quasi-automatically ventures her mechanical interpretation.

Here we are then, up against the wall, up against the wall of language. We are there exactly in our place, that is to say, on the same side as the patient, and it is on this wall—the same for him as for us—that we are going to attempt a reply to the echo of his speech. (E 316, N 101; tm)

For Klein too, then, even as she acts as therapist, the unconscious is the discourse of the Other: the practitioner speaks out of her own unconscious, out of her own inscription into language. And this is always true in Lacan’s conception: the psychoanalytical interpreter is not, himself, in possession of the truth of his interpretation, does not possess, in other words, the unconscious discourse he delivers, because the truth of this unconscious discourse is, as such, radically dialogic (it can only come about, discursively, in analytic dialogue; it is neither in, or of, the analyst, nor in, or of, the patient). “In the couple instantaneously formed... between the therapist and the subject [Dick], an authentic speech can be generated.”

The unconscious is the discourse of the Other, therefore, to the extent that the “authentic speech of the unconscious” is neither Dick’s nor Klein’s. The Other is in a position of a Third, in the structure of the psychoanalytic dialogue: it is a locus of unconscious language, sometimes created by the felicitous encounter, by the
This structural significance can be told as a narrative of the discovery, precisely, of this structure: a narrative of the discovery of the structure of the psychoanalytic situation. And this, indeed, is Lacan’s specific psychoanalytic story.

This Lacanian story, this particular conception of the narrativity of the psychoanalytic dialogue, is, however, very different from the usual one, which attributes the narration in the analytic dialogue respectively, or successively, to the two agents of the dialogue. Such, for instance, is Roy Schafer’s story:

I shall now attempt to portray this psychoanalytic dialogue in terms of two agents, each narrating or telling something to the other in a rule-governed manner. Psychoanalysis is telling and retelling along psychoanalytic lines: this is the theme and form of the present narration. It is, I think, a story worth telling.\(^7\)

But the Lacanian psychoanalytic story is altogether different because the narration happens not between two agents but between three terms, and since it takes place (takes effect) only through the emergence of this third—this Other, since the subject of the psychoanalytic narration, in all senses of the word (both its speaking subject and what is being spoken of), is neither the analysand nor the analyst, but the discourse of the Other. The psychoanalytic narrative is nothing other, for Lacan, than the story of, precisely, the discovery of the third participant in the structure of the dialogue. And this dramatic, narrative and structural discovery implicitly refers to Oedipus.

As in Freud’s case, though in a somewhat different manner, the (elliptical) Lacanian Oedipus emerges, in its peculiar double status as a psychoanalytic key and as a reference story, as an original relation between narrative and theory, between the static, spatial schema of a structure and the dynamic, temporal movement of a story. For Lacan, in much the same way as for Freud, the Oedipus embodies an unprecedented, revolutionary moment of coincidence between narration and theoretization.

But if for Freud the Oedipus embodies the insightful moment of discovery at which the psychoanalytic narration—in passing through the analytic practice and in turning back upon itself—becomes theory, it could be said that for Lacan the Oedipus embodies the insightful moment of discovery at which the psychoanalytic the-
ory—in passing through the analytic practice and in turning back upon itself—becomes narration: unfinished analytic dialogue, or an ongoing story of the discourse of the Other.

III

The Literary Reference:
Oedipus the King

Thus it is that, while Freud reads Sophocles’ text in view of a confirmation of his theory, Lacan rereads the Greek text, after Freud, with an eye to its specific pertinence not to theory but to psychoanalytic practice. Freud had already compared the drama of Oedipus to the process of a practical psychoanalysis:

The action of the play consists in nothing other than the process of revealing, with cunning delays and ever-mounting excitement—a process that can be likened to the work of a psychoanalysis—that Oedipus himself is the murder of Laius, but further that he is the son of the murdered man and of Jocasta. (SE 4.262)

But while this comparison between the literary work and the work of the analysand leads Freud to the confirmation of his theory—a theory of wish, of wish fulfillment, and of primordial Oedipal desires (incestuous and parricidal)—Lacan’s different analytic emphasis on the relevance of Oedipus to the clinician’s practice is not so much on wish as on the role of speech, of language, in the play.

As we have seen, what Freud discovered in Oedipus—the unconscious nature of desire—implies, in Lacan’s view, a structural relation between language and desire: a desire that articulates itself, substitutively, in a symbolic metonymic language, that is no longer recognizable by the subject.

The relations between human beings are truly established below the level of consciousness. It is desire which accomplishes the primitive structural organization of the human world, desire inasmuch as it is unconscious. (SII.262)

It is always at the juncture of speech, at the level of its apparition, its emergence... that the manifestation of desire is produced. Desire emerges at the moment of its incarnation into speech—it is coincident with the emergence of symbolism. (SII.273)

No wonder, then, that Oedipus the King, dramatizing as it does the primal scene of desire, in effect takes place on the other scene of language. Even more than Klein’s case history, Oedipus the King is in its turn a spectacular demonstration of the Lacanian formula, “the unconscious is the discourse of the Other”: for Oedipus’ unconscious is quite literally embodied by the discourse of the Oracle.

Oedipus’ unconscious is nothing other than this fundamental discourse whereby, long since, for all time, Oedipus’ history is out there—written, and we know it, but Oedipus is ignorant of it, even as he is played out by it since the beginning. This goes way back—remember how the Oracle frightens his parents, and how he is consequently exposed, rejected. Everything takes place in function of the Oracle and of the fact that Oedipus is truly other than what he realizes as his history—he is the son of Laius and Jocasta, and he starts out his life ignorant of this fact. The whole pulsation of the drama of his destiny, from the beginning to the end, hinges on the veiling of this discourse, which is his reality without his knowing it. (SII.245)

The unconscious is this subject unknown to the self, misapprehended, misrecognized, by the ego. (SII.59)

The Oedipal question is thus at the center of each practical psychoanalysis, not necessarily as a question addressing analysands’ desire for parents but as a question addressing analysands’ misapprehension, misrecognition (méconnaissances) of their own history.

The subject’s question in no way refers to the results of any specific weaning, abandonment, or vital lack of love or affection; it concerns the subject’s history inasmuch as the subject misapprehends, misrecognizes, it; this is what the subject’s actual conduct is expressing in spite of himself, insofar as he obscurely seeks to recognize this history. His life is guided by a problematics which is not that of his life experience, but that of his destiny—that is, what is the meaning, the significance, of his history? What does his life story mean?
An utterance is the matrix of the misrecognized part of the subject, and this is the specific level of the analytic symptom—a level that is decentered with respect to the individual experience, since it is precisely what the historical text must integrate. (S II.58)

Can we not then view analysis, indeed, as nothing other than this process of historical integration of the spoken, but misrecognized, part of the subject? To achieve this integration, the subject must, like Oedipus, recognize what he misrecognizes, namely, his desire and his history, inasmuch as they are both unconscious (that is, insofar as his life history differs from what he can know or own as his life story).

What we teach the subject to recognize as his unconscious is his history—that is to say, we help him to complete the present historization of the facts that have already determined a certain number of historical “turning points” in his existence. But if they have played this role, they did so already as facts of history, that is to say, insofar as they have been recognized in a certain sense or censored in a certain order. (E 261, N 52; tm)

As in Freud’s case, the reference of the clinical practice of psychoanalysis to the literary drama of the Oedipus hinges on the central question of the recognition (as opposed to what the subject had beforehand censored, misapprehended, or repressed). Recognition is indeed, for Freud as for Lacan, the crucial psychoanalytic stake both of the clinical and of the literary work.

The nature of the recognition is, however, somewhat differently conceived, in Freud’s discussion of the Oedipus as validating psychoanalytic theory and in Lacan’s discussion of the Oedipus as illuminating psychoanalytic practice. In Freud’s analysis, Oedipus recognizes his desire (incest, patricide) as unwittingly fulfilled, whereas Sophocles’ reader recognizes in himself the same desire, as repressed. The recognition is thus constative, or cognitive. In Lacan’s different emphasis, however, the psychoanalytic recognition is radically tied up with language, with the subject’s analytic speech act, and as such its value is less cognitive than performative: it is itself essentially a speech act, whose symbolic action modifies the subject’s history rather than cerebral observing or recording it at last correctly.

To bring the subject to recognize and to name his desire, this is the nature of the efficacious action of analysis. But it is not a question of recognizing something that would have already been there—a given—ready to be captured. In naming it, the subject creates, gives rise to something new, makes something new present in the world. (S II.267)

Analysis can have for its goal only the advent of an authentic speech and the realization by the subject of his history, in its relation to a future. (E 302, N 88; tm)

The analytical speech act by which the subject recognizes, and performatively names, his desire and his history (insofar as the misapprehension of the one has structured the other) has to be completed, consummated, by an ultimate analytic act of speech that Lacan calls the assumption of one’s history, that is, the ultimate acceptance and endorsement of one’s destiny, the acknowledgment of responsibility for the discourse of the Other in oneself, as well as the forgiving of this discourse.

It is certainly this assumption of his history by the subject, in so far as it is constituted by the speech addressed to the other, that constitutes the ground for the new method that Freud called Psychoanalysis. (E 257, N 48)

In Lacan’s eyes, however, Oedipus the King, while naming his desire and his history, does not truly assume them; at the end of Oedipus the King Oedipus accepts his destiny, but does not accept (forgive) himself. This is why Lacan would like to take us, as he puts it (in a formula once again resonant with many meanings), beyond Oedipus: first of all beyond Oedipus the King and into Sophocles’ tragic sequel, Oedipus at Colonus.

If the tragedy of Oedipus Rex is an exemplary literary work, psychoanalysts should also know this beyond which is realized by the tragedy of Oedipus at Colonus. (S II.245)
Beyond Oedipus:
Oedipus at Colonus

It is only in the sequel that the true assumption of his destiny by Oedipus takes place:

In *Oedipus at Colonus*, Oedipus says the following sentence: "Is it now that I am nothing that I am made to be a man?"
This is the end of Oedipus' psychoanalysis—Oedipus' psychoanalysis ends only at Colonus... This is the essential moment which gives its whole meaning to his history. (§ II.250)

What Lacan refers to is scene 2, which I will quote in two different translations:

**Oedipus**
And did you think the gods would yet deliver me?

**Ismene**
The present oracles give me that hope.

**Oedipus**
What oracles are they? What prophecy?

**Ismene**
The people of Thebes shall desire you, for their safety,
After your death, and even while you live.

**Oedipus**
What good can such as I bring any man?

**Ismene**
*They say it is in you that they must grow to greatness.*

**Oedipus**
Am I made man in the hour when I cease to be?

... ... ...

**Oedipus**
You have some hope then that they [the gods] are concerned
With my deliverance?

**Ismene**
I have, father.
The latest sentences of the oracle...

**Oedipus**
How are they worded? What do they prophesy?

**Ismene**
The oracles declare their strength's in you—

*Oedipus*

When I am finished, I suppose I am strong?

"Is it now that I am nothing that I am made to be a man?" What is it, then, that makes for Oedipus' humanity and strength at the very moment when he is "finished," at the moment when, reduced to nothing, he embodies his forthcoming death? What is it that Oedipus, beyond the recognition of his destiny, here assumes and that exemplifies "the end of his analysis"? He assumes the Other—in himself, he assumes his own relation to the discourse of the Other, "this subject beyond the subject" (§ II.245); he assumes, in other words, his radical decenterment from his own ego, his own self-image (Oedipus the King) and his own consciousness. And it is this radical acceptance and assumption of his own self-expropriation that embodies, for Lacan, the ultimate meaning of Oedipus' analysis, as well as the profound Oedipal significance of analysis as such.

This significance is historically consummated by Oedipus just when he awaits—and indeed assumes—his death. But this is no mere coincidence: the assumption of one's death is inherent to the analytical assumption. "You will have to read *Oedipus at Colonus*. You will see that the last word of man's relation to this discourse which he does not know is—death" (§ II.245). Why death? Here Lacan is at his most hermetic, his most elliptical. I believe, however, that this ellipse embodies one of his most profound and important psychoanalytic insights, and I will try—at my own risk—to shed some light on it by continuing, now, the analysis of *Oedipus at Colonus* "beyond" what Lacan explicitly articulates, by using some Lacanian highlights borrowed from other texts (other contexts). Let me first make an explanatory detour.

The Oedipus complex, in its traditional conception, encompasses two fantasized ("imaginary") visions of death: the father's death (imaginary murder) and the subject's own death in return (imaginary castration). The Oedipus is resolved through the child's identification with his father, constituting his superego; in Lacan's terms, the resolution takes place (as we have seen in Dick's case) through the introjection of the father's name (emboding the Law of incest prohibition), which becomes constitutive of the child's unconscious. As the first, archetypal linguistic symbol ("name") that represses, and replaces or displaces, the desire for the mother, the
lonus thus tells not simply the story of the telling of the story of Oedipus, the drama of symbolization and historization of the Oedipal desire, but beyond that ("beyond Oedipus"), as the final verses indicate, the story of the transmutation of Oedipus’ death (in all senses of the word, literal and metaphoric) into the symbolic language of the myth.

The fact that Oedipus is the patronymic hero of the Oedipus complex is not a coincidence. It would have been possible to choose another hero, since all the heroes of Greek mythology have some relation to this myth, which they embody in different forms. ... It is not without reason that Freud was guided toward this particular myth.

Oedipus, in his very life, is entirely this myth. He himself is nothing other than the passage of this myth into existence. (§ 11.267–268)

It is natural that everything would fall on Oedipus, since Oedipus embodies the central knot of speech. (§ 11.269)

Freud at Colonus

At the same time that Oedipus at Colonus dramatizes the “eternalization” of the Oedipal desire through its narrative symbolization, that is, Oedipus’ birth into his symbolic life, into his historical, mythic survival, the later play also embodies something of the order of an Oedipal death instinct: Oedipus, himself the victim of a curse and of a consequent parental rejection, pronounces in his turn a mortal curse against his sons. Oedipus’ destiny is thus marked by a repetition compulsion, illustrating and rejoicing, in Lacan’s eyes, Freud’s tragic intuition in Beyond the Pleasure Principle. Like the later Freud, the later Sophocles narrates, as his ultimate human (psychoanalytic) insight, the conjunction between life and death.

Oedipus at Colonus, whose entire being resides in the speech formulated by his destiny, concretizes the conjunction between death and life. He lives a life which is made of death, that sort of death which is exactly there, beneath life’s surface. This is also where we are guided by this text in which Freud is telling us, “Don’t believe that life ... is made of any force ... of