

Reading *L'étourdit*

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Preface

Is it readable?

As a writer Lacan's whole life could be summarised by the wish "in the end to be properly read" (*Lituraterre, Autres écrits*, p. 13). Far from being material for a simple reading, the *Ecrits* of 1966 and *a fortiori* the *Autres écrits*, published in 2001, should be deciphered as rebuses. In that, they fall into step with what is reserved for the dream in the Freudian *Traumdeutung*. There each fragment – obscure or not – is supposed to be subjected to the work of speech, of association and of the saying, in the belief that a sense might appear. But in decrypting the *Ecrits*, is one reading them properly?

In the course of a six year long Seminar aimed at interpreting Lacan's writing from A to Z, one text appeared particularly obscure and enigmatic to me: *L'étourdit* resisted decipherment. I promised myself to make an index of the obscurities of the text and to work on them one by one. In the course of this explanatory unpacking, the index expanded with new obscurities unperceived or minimised during the first reading: obscurity slipped into the texture of the illumination. Was I going to be plunged paradoxically into the darkness of a text closing in on itself in a terminal hermeticism?

If the number of my questions grew, I also noticed that this unpacking illuminated not only certain obscure points, but also the warp and woof of the text itself. Making my way in semi-darkness, the accomplishment of my desire – to interpret *L'étourdit* – remained in suspense until day dawned and the threads of explanation knotted and unknotted sufficiently to form an interpretation. For interpretation is not absolute clarity. Constructed from

light and shade, interpretation finds a response for each question in as much as each response re-launches the questioning.

For whom then is this interpretative dawn? Not for the text, *étourdit*, which has little regard for and remains blind to commentary. Perhaps for the benevolent look which will only find in it what it is willing to put into it, in other words the response of its work. Perhaps also for the blind look of the one who, in the shade, will betray the enigma in it? [*énigme*: translated as enigma or riddle].

The blind look of Tiresias who beyond display (*monstration*) and demonstration raises his voice and makes us divine the absence at stake in interpretation.

Introduction

L'étourdit is the primary form that diverts us from our conscious semantics, it is the apparition of the unconscious in its dimension of non-sense, and it opens up a beyond of common meaning.

Starting from this *étourdit* which is on the same level as the unconscious, might it be a matter of recalling the implication of the subject in his stating? Or again is interpretation subjective, predetermined by the subject? Let us say it right away: interpretation – in the psychoanalytic sense of the term – is not modal, it is not dependent either on the subjectivity, or the intersubjectivity of the personages present, even if transference and countertransference may operate perversely on it. It is not a matter either of going from the subjective state of dizziness (*étourdi*) to the subjective state of awareness.

If, in itself, psychoanalytic interpretation is not subjective, from where does it draw its objectivity? From the text no doubt, on condition of not hearing it from meaning alone. Interpretation is in no way to be reduced to explaining the meaning of the text! The analyst worthy of the name knows this well when he brings the whole weight of interpretation to bear on the objective quotation of the analysand: you said it in the slightest stumbling (*linguae or calami*). The turns say again and again what you have already said.

Let us open up then the question of *L'étourdit* from the objective letter of the text. The listener first hears *l'étourdi*; but the final letter *t* of *l'étourdit* directly invalidates this comprehension; the listener to the substantive participle *l'étourdi* changes his mind therefore and becomes a reader of the letter. In truth, the literal sequence *l'étourdit* has no sense, unless by making a pronoun of the *l'* and a verb of *étourdit*: “that amuses and bewilders (*étourdit*) him”. The letter *t* poses the question: where has the grammatical subject of this literal sequence *l'étourdit* gone? *L'étourdit* goes beyond the meanings of its components, it addresses us abruptly: where has the grammatical subject disappeared to? Who will make it appear? By the development of its questions, *L'étourdit* will induce an effect of (psycho-) logical subject in as much and with the result that according to it, the listening subject will be transformed into a subject reader of the letter, he will be Other. This new subject, an effect of writing, verifies precisely what is at stake in Lacan's *Ecrits*, as *The Purloined Letter* announces it to us. That is to read properly, that is interpretation at the same time as the disappearance-appearance of a subject.

L'étourdit which is phonetically possible is graphically impossible. The possible *étourdi* is contradicted by the writing of an impossible *étourdit*. Possible and impossible, *étourdit* is an enigma all the more difficult in that this signifier will come only one single time in the text. That the title condenses the text, that it is its pivot or gives its interpretative key, the enigma of *l'étourdit*, must be elucidated from its occurrence in the text.

The taking up again of the noun *étourdit* in the text, which can be called the taking up again of S_1 in S_2 or the taking up again of a signifier in another signifier, is inscribed in a paragraph occupying a central place well delimited by quotation marks. This paragraph is also the only paragraph in quotation marks:

“You have satisfied me, little(cut)man (*petithomme*). You have comprehended, that is what was required (*fallait*). On [you] go (*Vas*), there is not too much *étourdit* for it to return to you after being half-said (*l'après midit*). Thanks to the hand that will respond to you, because you call her Antigone, the very one who can tear you apart because I sphynx my notall (*pastoute*) in her, you will even be able towards evening to make yourself the

equal of Tiresias and like him, because of having played the Other, divine what I told you" (S 25a; AE 468).¹

What do these quotation marks tell us? The paragraph puts on stage a stating necessarily different to that of the remainder of the text. Who are the "I" and the "you" of this direct discourse?

Who speaks in this paragraph? The response is not explained outside the quotation and appears enigmatic not simply for the pressurised reader, but still more for the attentive reader. The speaker nevertheless designated herself twice within the text itself: 1. "You have satisfied (*satisfaite*) me"; grammatically, it would therefore be a being of the feminine gender who speaks, and 2. "I sphynx my notall (*pastoute*)"; as Sphynx, she would pose her riddles. To whom?

No doubt, the Sphynx addresses her riddle to Oedipus and we could slip into her skin to pose the question of our own enigmatic truth, as Freud had already done to disentangle his own rather unusual family history. But more directly, the paragraph in quotation marks follows the preceding paragraph written by Lacan: it would be addressed then first of all to Lacan himself. What is more the grammar of *L'étourdit* much as he has contributed to the approach of the *pastoute* (that we will provisionally leave in the riddle of the Sphynx). Lacan's contribution to the *pastoute* is structured in three moments that are counted out: first four, then two, finally three (explained as the quadruped of the four places of the four discourses, the bipod of the sexes and the tripod formed by the two sexes plus the phallus or by the phallic triangulation). Four, two, three, the order is sufficiently bewildering and enigmatic for us to hear in it the quotation of the riddle of the Sphynx. Who is the creature that successively walks on four paws (the morning), on two paws (at midday) and on three paws (the evening)? The question of the Sphynx would therefore be addressed to Lacan himself, a new Oedipus faced with the ancient question: what is man?

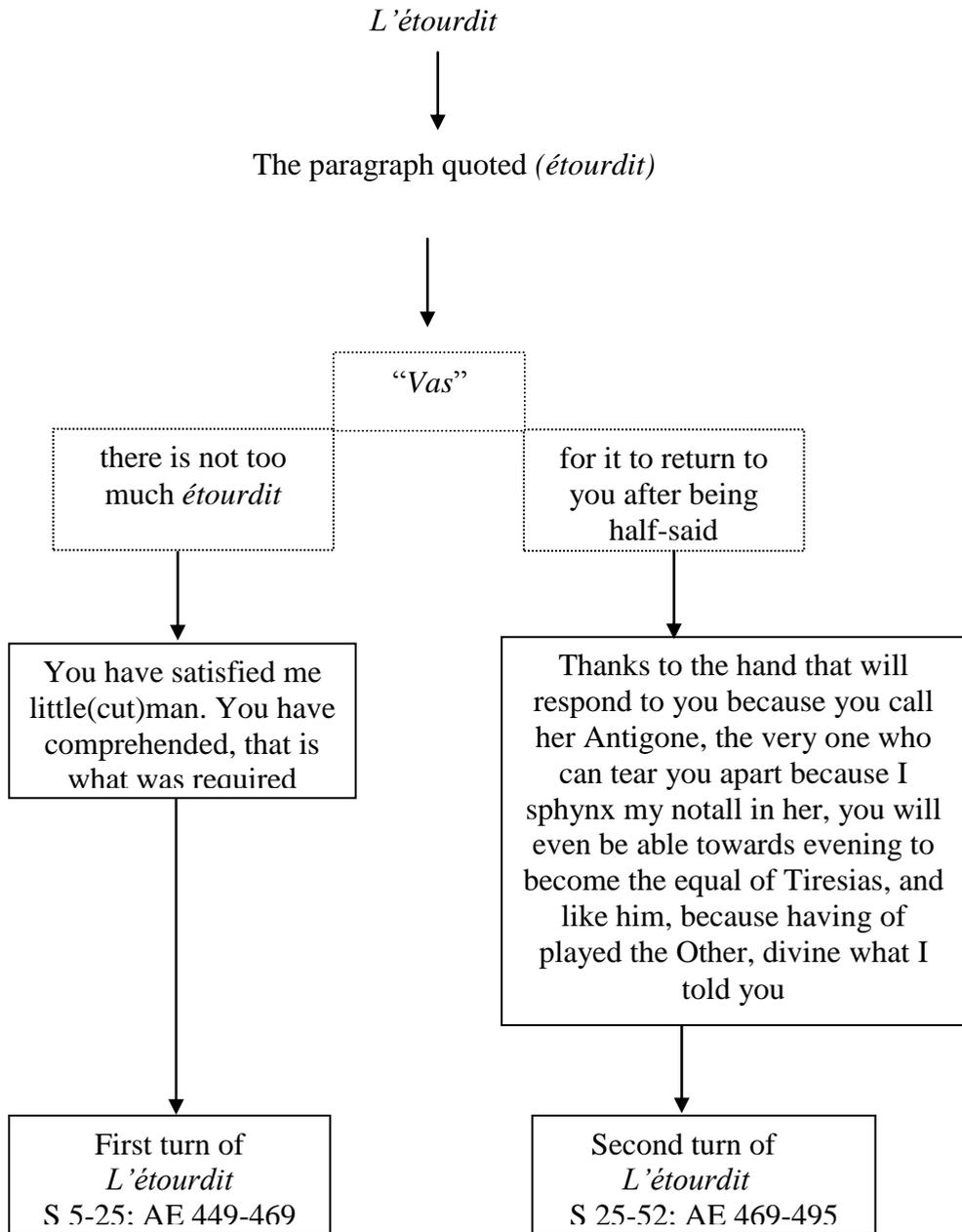
¹ The letter S followed by a number then by a lower case a, b, c, d, e refers to the first edition of *L'étourdit* in the journal *Scilicet*, number 4, published by Le Seuil in Paris in 1973. The page number and the lower case letter situate the passage in the first, second, third, fourth or fifth part of the particular page. The letters AE refer to the edition of *L'Étourdit* in *Autres écrits*, Paris: Le Seuil, 2001. The letter E refers to the *Ecrits*. Trans. B. Fink, New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2006.

The roles would thus be clearly shared: “I” would be the Sphynx, “you” would be Lacan. But why not have clearly named the interlocutors involved in this direct discourse?

Let us return to our quotation or to our riddle. Formally, the enigmatic paragraph is composed of four sentences:

- 1) “You have satisfied me, little(cut)man”.
- 2) “You have comprehended, that is what was required”.
- 3) “On (you) go, there is not too much *étourdit*, for it to return to you after being half-said”.
- 4) “Thanks to the hand that will respond to you because you call her Antigone, the very one who can tear you apart because I sphynx my notall (*pastoute*) in her, you will even be able towards evening to make yourself the equal of Tiresias and like him, because of having played the Other, divine what I told you”.

The third sentence contains the term *étourdit* and opens with a *Vas* which articulates two propositions, a juxtaposed causal (“there is not too much *étourdit*”) followed by a subordinate consecutive (“for it to return to you after being half-said”), or again a first half-said followed by a second half-said. If the term *étourdit* is the articulation of the text of *L'étourdit*, then the two propositions of the third sentence ought to articulate the text by means of the paragraph.



Vas, the only verb of movement in the discourse of the Sphynx, is for all that another verbal form from which the subject is effaced. Might it be the imperative of the Sphynx directed at Lacan? The spelling of *Vas*¹ formally contradicts it. *Vas* is not an imperative form (which is written *va*). *Vas* can only be a properly conjugated form of the verb *aller* (to go): *tu vas*. And, grammatically, we do not write *Vas* without its subject. The effacing of the grammatical subject then puts in question again the interpretation “you go”, *tu vas*, and makes a new possible value for *vas* appear: the ancient form of the first person of the present indicative of the verb to go: *je vas*, “I go”. It is from this “*élégante allée*” (S 17a; AE 460) at first a-personal, from the grammatical equivocation, *je/tu vas*, that the (psycho-) logical subjects involved in the quotation will be explained: [you] are inscribed in a movement of going on condition of absenting yourself as a person since this advance is also mine (that of a woman and of her enigma). What is this going (*Vas*)? The Sphynx gives the response: the going starts from the *étourdi(t)* in as much as there is not too much of it and response is not without three graphical appendices: the *t* of *étourdit*, the *s* of *Vas* and the *t* of *après-midit*. These three letters are not too much in order to go from a possible phonetics (*étourdi, va, midi*) to an impossible grammar (*étourdit, Vas, midit*). What meaning can we give to these three supernumerary letters? At first sight, none. This indeed is what refers us back to the sounds, to the rhymes of the *dit* (*étourdit/midit*) mediated by the movement which goes from one to the other. There are not too many turns said (*des tours dits*) for it to return to you after being half-said. Beyond the homophonous equivocation, passing by way of the grammatical equivocation, we already hear the logical equivocation proper to the saying, which goes from one thing said to the other. This saying arises from the detours of the things said, the fragments of what is said, the “half-said” impossible to synthesise. Between *étourdit* and *midit*, *Vas* divides the whole text in two: it is halfway through the text that the Sphynx appears with her half-body (woman-lion) to pose to Oedipus the question of the half-said truth about man: what is a man?

But what is a half-said that is re-said if not a quotation? And what is something said that makes itself understood as half-said, if not a riddle? *L'étourdit* is going to illuminate the half-saying in the double register of quotation and riddle. These two threads of the quotation and the riddle

¹ The editor of *Autres écrits* has “corrected” the *Vas* to *va*.

intersect and are woven together. We have started from the quotation of the riddle (of the direct discourse of the Sphinx) to set en route the riddle of the quotation, to pose the question: what is meant by going over the saying a second time? What is meant by quoting?

Interpretation has precisely as medium the two registers of quotation and riddle.¹ *L'étourdit* will deal with psychoanalytic interpretation. How will it deal with it? In what manner? In the manner of an interpretation: *L'étourdit* interprets interpretation. The taking up again of the title in the discourse of the Sphinx is already the degree zero of interpretation: *étourdit* is quoted and remains enigmatic (it is, in particular, a term foreign to the habitual lexicon of psychoanalysis).

The articulation of the title with the paragraph, as we have seen, announces still more to us: psychoanalytic interpretation is always played out in two turns (said by *L'étourdit*):

First Turn of What is Said in Interpretation or First Part of *L'étourdit*

The first part presented in the third sentence as “there is not too much *étourdi*” indicates a first half-said which is not too much. This first half-said was already expressed by the Sphinx: “You have satisfied me little(cut)man”. “Me” appears as the riddle personified by the Sphinx and “you” as the response personified by Lacan. The riddle sought a precise blossoming (the feminine mystery) and the little(cut)man has satisfied her as he was able. For the man habitually prefixed by good, gentle or prudent (good man, gentleman or prudent man) is here prefixed by a little confronted with the riddle. Why? The homophonous equivocation (*petithomme/petit homme*) opens up to us, by means of the letter (of the *gramma*), the path of logical equivocation which will be played out between the enigma and the interpreter: little(cut)man before the riddle because *peti*

¹ “These two registers, in as much as they participate in a half-saying, are what give us the medium – and, one might say, the heading – under which interpretation intervenes. Interpretation – those who use it notice this – is often set up by a riddle. A riddle found as far as possible in the of the discourse of the psychoanalysand, and that you, the interpreter, can in no way complete by yourself, that you cannot consider as an avowal without lying. Quotation on the other hand, sometimes taken from the same text...” (Seminar XVII. Unpublished trans. C. Gallagher, [17th December 1969], p. 11).

thomme [the explanation of this will be given later (S 18de): the cut (*thomme*) proper to petition (*peti*), in the register of the demand which gives to the male his petty virile character]. The satisfied, referring to the inexhaustible enigma of a woman, and the little(cut)man to the inadequacy of the man, now appear fundamentally disparate: the relationship between these two terms is properly impossible, “there is no sexual relationship”.

The first chapter of the first part (*The Meaning-Relationship*) will start from what is said in the riddle in order to seek in it relationships of meaning (for example 4 paws, 2 paws, 3 paws).

The riddle is for the one who can say something about it (second chapter: saying).

And this saying culminates necessarily at the impossible relationship between the riddle and its interpreter, between the Sphynx and Oedipus, between a woman and a man (third chapter: *the absence of sexual relationship*).

The riddle right away indicated a satisfaction. But who can say she is satisfied if there is no relationship between a woman and a man? One satisfies a function as one satisfies a need; it is the function of the riddle that is satisfied by the little(cut)man which serves her as argument (without exhausting the domain of the aforesaid function). This function will be called the phallic function (fourth chapter). Here the articulation of the first turn or the quotation of the riddle is completed: we will have comprehended how the riddle functions, what is said by it and its absence (first turn: the relationship of meaning and the absence of sexual relationship).

A remainder subsists, the second sentence: “You have comprehended, this is what was necessary”. We know Lacan’s distrust *vis-à-vis* comprehension, even if he does not recoil from “taking together, *prendre ensemble*”, from summarising a conceptual totality, indeed a whole theory, in audacious short-cuts.

What is the role of this comprehension? A problem all the more crucial in that for us it is a matter of comprehending *L'étourdit*. The comprehension is not terminal, but inaugural of a “this is what was required”. Far from the good conscience of having comprehended, the required (*fallait*) introduces

rather a fault (*faillie*) into comprehension and this fault will serve to re-launch the phallic function arising from the absence of sexual relationship. For the formulae built on the phallic function (*c'est ce qu'il phallait*) will make there appear the notall which had served as a motor for the movement of the first turn without us knowing.

But what will we say about this discrete motor? We can only grasp it by letting it turn. Here then we have started on a second turn: “[You] go, there is not too much *étourdit*, for it to return to you after being half-said”.

Second Turn of What is Said by Interpretation or Second Part of L'Étourdit

What difference will we draw between the two turns, between the first half-said and the second half-said? The Sphinx says it in her *pastoute* (in italics in the text): it is the notall that will inscribe a difference between the two turns. The four chapters of the first turn can then be taken up again in the light of this notall; the four chapters of the second turn will be the same except for that fact that they will highlight between them and their homonyms of the first turn a saying irreducible to what is said (the difference between the two). By this there will be illuminated the riddle of the quotation: what is meant by re-saying if not already interpreting (second turn: the discourse of the analyst and interpretation).

I will summarily point out the possible sections of this second part according to the propositions of the fourth sentence pronounced by the Sphinx:

- 1) “Thanks to the hand that will respond to you because you call her Antigone”, the hand by which Lacan guides himself here is the topology of surfaces (chapter 1) which takes up again the question of the signifier, illuminated now by the phallic function developed up to the notall;
- 2) “the very one that can tear you apart because I sphynx my notall in her”, this topology tears the analyst apart in order to situate him at his specific place in the discourse of the analyst

(chapter 2) which permits the saying in general to be illuminated;

3) “you will even be able towards evening to make yourself the equal of Tiresias”; it is a matter of equalling Tiresias in his comprehension of structure (third chapter) which is the development of the absence of sexual relationship;

4) “and like him, by having played the Other, divine what I have said to you”. It is a matter of going from the Other to interpretation (fourth chapter) which is nothing other than going over the function of the riddle, of the phallic function.

Let us recapitulate the turns that we will speak about:

1. *First turn: the signifier and the absence of sexual relationship*

Chapter 1: the meaning-relationship

Chapter 2: saying

Chapter 3: the absence of sexual relationship

Chapter 4: the phallic function and the formulae of sexualisation

2. *Second turn: the discourse of the analyst and interpretation*

Chapter 1: the teaching of topology

Chapter 2: the discourse of the analyst

Chapter 3: structure

Chapter 4: interpretation

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