Dictionary or encyclopedia? Meaning, knowledge and transmissibility

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Our work will be threefold. The first will be to establish - and this will be a kind of bias that we will justify - that the dictionary is not intended to transmit any knowledge whatsoever. This will lead us, secondly, to set out what we subsume under the concept of knowledge, which amounts to showing that only the encyclopedia can rigorously accommodate it. We shall see that this is modern knowledge, and that it can be fully transmitted as such. Our third and final point, however, is that knowledge cannot be totalized in the form of modern knowledge alone.

It's understood here, since this is one of the anchor points of this Workshop, that the dictionary has to do with language. A dictionary gives the definitions of terms in a language. This implies, at least if we follow d'Alembert's analysis in his Encyclopédie article on the dictionary, that the dictionary has at least two limitations, at least when it comes to making it the medium of knowledge.
d'Alembert's first limitation is :

> […] qu'il est des mots qu'on doit jamais définir, puiqu'autrement toutes les définitions ne formeroient plus qu'une espece de cercle vicieux, dans lequel un mot seroit expliqué par un autre mot qu'il auroit servi à expliquer lui-même.

In fact, we'd have nothing but an infinite slide, with no end in sight, bordering on the absurd, if all a dictionary had to do was provide a hypertextual reference from one term to another. Of course, the aim is not to define all the terms in the language.

The second limitation, again according to d'Alembert, and of more interest to us here, is that there are words in the language that "neither can nor should be defined". Words that should not be included in a dictionary are those that designate "the general properties of beings". D'Alembert gives the following examples, among others: "existence, extent, thought, sensation, time".

So it's not so much a question of pointing out the inherent limitations of language that a dictionary necessarily encounters (the slippage of meaning due to the equivocation of any signifier, the ever-present multiplicity of interpretations, the circularity induced by the desire to define all the terms of a language, etc.), but rather of deciding, as d'Alembert firmly does, that a dictionary's purpose is simply not to deal with concepts. The question of the relationship between knowledge and the "dictionary" form is therefore not really relevant. The dictionary's function is simply not to be a receptacle of knowledge. It may contain knowledge about language, but it is not suitable for transmitting knowledge as such.

Following in the footsteps of the Aristotelian tradition handed down through Euclid and the *more geometrico*, we consider knowledge (science) to be a discourse governed by three principles - principles that we give by following the analyses given by Jean-Claude Milner in his book *Le périple structural* :

a) The principle of object uniqueness and domain homogeneity. In other words, all the propositions of a body of knowledge must concern the elements of the same domain and relate to a single object;
b) The principle of minimum and maximum: the propositions of a body of knowledge are either theorems or axioms; a maximum number of theorems must be deduced from a minimum number of axioms, expressed by a minimum number of primitive concepts. This can be summed up as epistemological minimalism;
c) The principle of self-evidence: all axioms and primitive concepts must be self-evident, dispensing with the need to demonstrate them and, above all, to define them.

Knowledge is therefore a discourse that, once constituted, gives itself in axiomatic form. This means that it cannot lend itself to definitional form. As Badiou puts it in his *Court traité d'ontologie transitoire*:

> Une pensée axiomatique saisit la disposition de termes non définis. Elle ne rencontre jamais ni une définition de ces termes ni une explicitation praticable de ce qui n'est pas eux. Les énoncés primordiaux d'une telle pensée exposent le pensable sans le thématiser. Sans doute le ou les termes primitifs sont-ils inscrits. Mais ils le sont, non pas au sens d'une nomination dont il faudrait représenter le référent, mais au sens d'une série de dispositions, où le terme n'est que dans le jeu réglé de ses connexions fondatrices. *Court traité d'ontologie transitoire*, p.32

Paradoxically, then, we have here a definition of a presentation of knowledge that makes it repugnant to definition, since the axiom prescribes without even naming. If we consider that knowledge must be constituted in axiomatic form, then it is

impossible for the dictionary form to accommodate it. Knowledge cannot be presented in the form of simple definitions of its own concepts.

We would now like to consider the encyclopedia as the destination of knowledge. In other words, we'd like to consider that all constituted knowledge must eventually be deposited (sedimented) in an encyclopedia. This can only be affirmed by re-explaining what we subsume under the concept of knowledge.

If we want to make the encyclopedia the place where knowledge settles, it's because we believe, following Lacan and Badiou, that truth makes a hole in it. When it occurs (in "a soul and a body"), it disrupts existing knowledge. Nevertheless, once it has been axiomatized, once it has been sedimented in a rigorous discourse, it in turn constitutes knowledge. The encyclopedia, then, is defined as that which can accommodate this constituted knowledge. Encyclopedias are therefore repugnant to truth (at least if we understand it in its event-driven sense, in its nascent status), but they do make it possible to collect constituted knowledge. In this sense, the knowledge it conveys is frozen (as if mortified, it represents a kind of photograph of its state at a given period), but in return - and this is what we're particularly interested in - it becomes fully transmissible.

We then need to define the encyclopedia in such a way as to reflect its specificity as a repository of constituted knowledge. We have already identified knowledge here as a regulated discourse, given in axiomatic form, that is, as what we might call modern knowledge. If we follow Koyré's epistemological considerations, we can say that there is a caesura in the age of science (in the 17th century, with the advent of the Cartesian cogito). Ancient science gave way to modern science. The question then becomes: what distinguishes modern science from ancient science? To answer this question, we need to return to the term "knowledge". Here, we present Jean-Claude Milner's analysis in *Le juif de savoir*.

The word savoir, in its ordinary usage, can be taken in two ways. It can be taken in a relational sense, thanks to a genitive (whether objective or subjective), in which case knowledge is necessarily knowledge-of, knowledge of a known object or knowledge of a knowing subject. It can also be taken absolutely, as a disjunction between any known object and any knowing subject.

Absolute, Milner points out, in the sense of the grammarians. That is, in the sense in which, according to them, a transitive verb is used absolutely when no complement is given to it.

According to Milner, the word savoir, both as a verb and as a noun, has both relational and absolute uses. We can therefore contrast ancient and medieval knowledge with modern knowledge. To quote Milner: "Ancient and medieval knowledge is relational and engaged; modern knowledge is absolute". Absolute knowledge is therefore knowledge without a master, knowledge that can be

transmitted in its entirety. Modern knowledge, then, is knowledge as transmissible. For a long time, it was assumed that the transmission of knowledge, or at least its integral transmission, required the intervention of an unsubstitutable subject (a master, dispensing to his disciples through his Word and his Presence the more-than-knowledge). Without this more-than-knowledge (which could just as well be called wisdom), and without the master who was its support, no transmission seemed possible in its entirety. The path of the mathematic, which is the path of modern knowledge, asserts, on the contrary, that there is no master (or disciples). If the transmission of modern science does not require a master (but at most teachers), this is precisely because it entrusts itself entirely to the literal workings of mathematics.

From Milner's analysis, we can derive a criterion for distinguishing between the diffusion and transfer of knowledge. All knowledge that cannot be reduced entirely to the form of a mathematic would be transferred, and all literalized (or axiomatized) knowledge would be disseminated. It remains to be seen what knowledge still resists literalization, and why. Research programs would then have to be set up to modernize the knowledge that still belongs to the sphere of ancient knowledge (as, for example, we moved from alchemy - transferable knowledge par excellence, since it required the person to whom it was transmitted to be "pure" and meet certain binding subjective conditions - to chemistry - mathematized knowledge and thus fully disseminable). An ancient form of knowledge would be only partially transferable, whereas modern knowledge would be fully disseminable. We know, for example, that it was Lacan's project for psychoanalysis to make it not only transferable (through the analytic experience alone, still shrouded in mystery), but also disseminable and fully transmissible (the pass should be the place where we attempt to universalize the singularity of an analytic experience). It's clear, then, that if the encyclopedia is to be a place where knowledge is collected and transmitted in its entirety, it must meet modern criteria of knowledge. In this sense, the encyclopedia must be designed to disseminate knowledge. Diffusion would then lose its pejorative connotation (of knowledge given on the cheap, as it were), to connote a possibility of giving knowledge without remainder (devoid of the aura of the Mysteries).

The knowledge that proves unfit to be conveyed by the form of the dictionary is thus clearly identifiable with modern knowledge, and it is therefore the encyclopedia (which provides the interplay of its concepts and presents itself in a particular axiomatized form) that must take charge of it. As Badiou puts it in his system of *Being and Event*:

> Le savoir se réalise comme encyclopédie. Une encyclopédie doit être ici entendue comme une sommation de jugements sous un déterminant commun.

We won't go into the details of Badiou's thinking here, but we'd just like to point out that he considers the encyclopedia to be the destined locus of knowledge (of course, he constructs a rather peculiar concept of encyclopedia for this purpose). For Badiou, it's simply a matter of considering the encyclopedia as a place where knowledge is realized in such a way that it is ordered and classified according to a specific language (for him, truth is a hole in knowledge, as no determinant of the encyclopedia can account for it. No current constituted language can yet account for truths yet to come. For Badiou, the encyclopedia is repugnant to truth.)

For our part, we can simply consider this result: if knowledge is to be fully transmissible (by means of an encyclopedia), it must be brought together in a modern form, a form that is absolute rather than relational and clutched, a form that is axiomatic and literalized rather than definitional.

If the dictionary is repugnant to knowledge, giving the simple illusion of giving a univocal meaning to concepts, the encyclopedia, as a system that accommodates knowledge, is no less a vehicle for fixed knowledge, which must obey precise criteria. While it's true that many types of knowledge are displayed in the encyclopedia in such a way as to be fully transmissible, isn't this done without severe constraints? Under the guise of being able to house knowledge that can be disseminated in its entirety, are we not excluding an entire field of knowledge? We need to ask ourselves whether certain types of knowledge, which take neither the cluttered, relational form of ancient knowledge, nor the absolute form of modern knowledge, are nonetheless conceivable? Is there not, ultimately, a third way of science, beyond the ancient and modern forms of knowledge?

As already mentioned, Lacan wanted to give psychoanalysis the form of modern science. He tried to constitute it in the form of mathemes, so that it could be fully transmissible, its transmission no longer dependent on the whim of any master. He failed, and his very last teaching - which we can date from Seminar XXIV, L'insu que sait de l'une-bévue s'aile à mourre - was the declamation of this failure. One thing became clear: the path of modern science does not allow us to write down the knowledge specific to psychoanalysis. In other words, it's impossible to create an encyclopedia of psychoanalysis.

Modern science must give way to a third way, and this is what Badiou tells us at the very beginning of L'être et l'événement, in our opinion, by acknowledging Lacan's failure.

Let's quote Badiou again:

> Nous sommes contemporains d'une troisième époque de la science, après la grecque et la galiléenne. La césure nommable qui ouvre cette troisième époque n'est pas (comme pour la grecque) une invention – celle des mathématiques

> démonstratives –, ni (comme la galiléenne) une coupure – celle qui mathématise le discours physique. C'est une refonte, d'où s'avèrent la nature du socle mathématique de la rationalité, et le caractère de la décision de pensée qui l'établit. (p.9)

The mathematic must be considered within its limits. Lacan had to return to monstration. At the very end of his teaching, Lacan attempts to construct a discourse that is not semblant. To this end, he rejected all existing discourses as semblants, fantasies or even delusions (he went so far as to speak of generalized delusions). He used his last strength in an effort to "imagine the real", and this involved the use of knots and ropes. In this way, he abolished himself in the monstration of knots (the doctrine of the Borromean knot thus came to an end, in pure silent monstration rather than in writing and words).

Montaigne, whom Lacan echoes at the end of his teaching, also said at one point (in the marginal additions he made to the last edition of his Essais, which he called allongeails) that: "What I cannot express, I point to". It's a foreshadowing of the last proposition of Wittgenstein's Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus ("what you can't talk about, you have to keep quiet about", i.e. show). And indeed, in the silence of the real, Lacan points to the blackboard, to the figures traced on the blackboard, or to the figures, when they are too complex, brought to him on white rollers. This is just the thing to remind us of how the ancient Greeks, the first mathematicians, taught. They had large white panels brought in, on which were traced the geometrical figures that were the subject of their demonstrations. These were diagrams on which, as the course developed, letters were inscribed.

At the end of his teaching, Lacan returns to monstration far more insistently than he had done before. Diderot, too, almost stopped writing at one point, and spent the rest of his life working on a process of monstration - the creation of the plates for the Encyclopédie.

On a different note, and to return to the failure of the totalization of knowledge in the form of modern knowledge, we can note that D'Alembert was already doubtful as to whether the axiomatic path was the most conducive to the transmission of knowledge. Indeed, for Diderot's collaborator, the philosopher's task merged with the encyclopedic enterprise itself, at least insofar as it consisted in clarifying and putting in order a knowledge that was then known to be devoid of any absolute foundation or ontological anchorage. Generally speaking, D'Alembert's positions are far from coinciding with the rationalist and scientistic optimism that is usually attributed to him. His efforts to mark the limits of the "spirit of calculation" that was taking hold in the sciences at the time, his doubts about the possibility of giving a truly satisfactory systematic presentation of knowledge, his frequent warnings against the "abuses of the philosophical spirit" itself, all bear witness to the fact that

D'Alembert's philosophy was not only the most rigorous expression of the intellectual ambitions of his time, but also the most lucid attempt to think through their unsurpassable limits.

We can see, then, that the latest Lacan's assessment of the failure of "the path of the mathematic" is in line with one of the encyclopedists' problems. When it comes to consigning knowledge for the purpose of disseminating it in its entirety, we inexorably come up against limits. Limits due to the equivocation inherent in the use of language, limits to the mathematization and literalization of knowledge.

Finally, to answer our initial question, we would say that only the encyclopedia can meet the imperative of conveying knowledge. Knowledge, if it has attained the form of modern science, is written in literal form, and can thus be accommodated within the encyclopedia.

The encyclopedia must therefore house axiomatic thinking in order to escape the trap of equivocality inherent in definitional form. In other words, there are very few genuine encyclopedias, and even simple dictionaries can easily be presented as such.

What remains to be done today is to consider what form might be best suited to conveying knowledge, a form that is neither relational and cluttered, nor inscribable in the form of small, collected letters. We need to see whether the dictionary and encyclopedia forms should not give way to a completely different form, yet to be created. In the meantime, let's consider that when it comes to expounding knowledge that belongs to the third age of science (of which we'd be contemporaries), we'll follow that adage of the Zen master Deleuze speaks of: "whenever we're asked about a meaning, we'll answer with a designation, a pure monstration." The proof of movement by walking, in short.