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“ I WOULD PREFER NOT TO ”

*Or - Who's Afraid of Hegel? Protagoras and Parrhêsia*<sup>1</sup>

*Il n'y a pas de philosophie de Barbara Cassin*

*Barbara Cassin (Badiou and Cassin 116)*

In *Peregrinations*, Jean- François Lyotard describes the inescapable feeling of inadequacy plaguing those who attempt to become philosophers:

One declares oneself philosopher or writer. One must admit that one is an imposter. Any veritable thinking is accompanied by nothing but its own sense of indignity. The only mode of escaping this for an instant is to exhibit the impossible: one thinks here and now, with the situation, and in a single situation of thought at a time. So as that which menaces the work of thought (or of writing) is not that it remains episodic, but that it pretends to be complete. (23)

This quote was read aloud by Cassin at a symposium devoted to Lyotard's philosophy – an intervention which was later published in the volume *Les transformateurs Lyotard* – as an attempt to recapture his legacy from those who wanted to reintegrate him into philosophical tradition. Reading from the invitation to this event, Cassin highlighted a desire to undo “the privileged link that usually has been established between his thought [that of J.-F. L.] and certain themes (such as the aesthetic and *sophistic relativism*) in order to reaffirm others that can be valued in a more permanent and structural fashion (like that of the just)” (Cassin, “L'amour” 178). In other words, the symposium was aimed at turning Lyotard into a proper philosopher, thereby not only offering us a philosophy as an object of study, but which would also allow for the inclusion of his philosophy into the historical narrative that forms the discipline.

In many ways, this paragraph from Lyotard encapsulates Cassin's own relationship to philosophy: a reluctant philosopher, she rather sees herself as a thinker of the moment, of what the Greeks called *kairos*, engaged in a constant battle against what she describes as the authoritarian and monopolizing tendencies of philosophy, both in terms of its discourses and its histories. One might therefore assume that Cassin's relatively marginal place in contemporary philosophy can be explained by how she takes up this position, defining her own intellectual practice as *philosophistics* rather than philosophy. Thus, despite her role as a public intellectual in France

today, even Cassin herself makes the claim that she is a non-philosopher because she lacks a philosophy. However, if we are invested in the task of understanding Cassin's intellectual contribution – meaning not only taking the call of this issue seriously but also trying to offer a counter-image to Badiou's often repeated critique of her, claiming that she is the perfect representative of what he calls a "decisive relativism" which incapacitates any attempt to take up the fallen mantle of philosophy – it is perhaps necessary for us to begin by moving beyond the discipline of philosophy, venturing into an intellectual tradition that constitutes one of its earliest counterparts: the sophists and their rhetoric.

It is not difficult to imagine a scenario in which the work of Cassin would have been greeted with open arms in the field of Rhetorical Studies, especially within its major strongholds in North America. Not only because this tradition, in analogy with Cassin, for a long time has been involved in a battle against philosophy's claim to exclusivity over realms such as argumentation, reasoning, and truth, but also because this struggle often has been carried out in the name of the ancient sophists. Already in one of the field's founding texts on the matter, Robert L. Scott's 1967 article "On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic", the epistemological *differend* between rhetoric and philosophy is viewed through the sophistic lens:

The sophists facing their experiences found consistently not *logos* [...] but *dissoi logoi*, that is, contradictory claims. [...] My argument is not that one has the choice to act on prior truth or to act to create truth. One may act assuming that the truth is fixed and that his persuasion, for example, is simply carrying out the dictates of that truth, but he will be deceiving himself. (15)

But despite the fact that the publication of what we might call Cassin's *magnum opus*, *L'Effet sophistique*, coincided with both the heydays of so-called French Theory's influence on the departments of literature and rhetoric in the United States as well as with a massive interest in what is today known as sophistic rhetoric, she was nonetheless never rewarded with any influential position in the field. As an indication of this, it is notable that, notwithstanding a few articles appearing in international journals of Rhetoric, the first major English translation of her work did not appear until 2014, and even to this day, discussions of her work remain scarce within Rhetorical Studies. Given this situation, one might ask if we find ourselves in such a situation simply because, like there is supposedly no Cassinian philosophy, neither does she offer us any rhetorical theory.<sup>2</sup> However, taking Cassin's claim that she lacks a philosophy proper at face value would risk undermining the very foundation of one of her most central tenets: that *logos* has a *world-effect* (cf. Cassin, *Sophistique*). If this is true, that is, if we are 'doing things with words', should not also Cassin's own writings provide us with a world, a certain performance staging her philosophical perspective? Furthermore, should Cassin's self-described phobic relationship to philosophy lead us to believe that she is a non-philosopher? Just because the phobic tends to avoid the phobic object, should we also draw the conclusion that phobia constitute a state of non-relation? In an attempt to avoid these contradictions, the following article aims at tracing the

*world-effect* of Cassin's work, focusing on her contribution to the understanding of a number of philosophico-rhetorical questions originating in Plato's *Gorgias*, i.e. the relationship between rhetoric, philosophy, and sophistry; the opposition between speaking true and speaking persuasively; and the difference between truth and mere public opinion. The claim made here is that Cassin has not only changed the ways in which we can read this age-old struggle between philosophy and rhetoric, but also that her contribution, at least from a rhetorical standpoint, has been severely undervalued. Furthermore Cassin's rereading of the history of philosophy and rhetoric is not simply of historiographical interest. Therefore, in order to move toward the questions of phobia and non-philosophy, it is also important to investigate the consequences that her re-readings have had for her theory of politics, both in terms of its possibilities and its limitations, and how it attempts to escape the limits on politics already drawn in antiquity. To reach this point, we need to begin by briefly recapitulating the history of the opposition between rhetoric and philosophy as it can be read through the lens offered by Cassin's *Gorgias*. We will, thereafter, be moving on to her understanding of politics, opposing it to another attempt at rereading the history of rhetoric and philosophy driven by the political problems of our time, namely the one offered by Foucault's final lectures. Finally, we will reach the problem of phobia by focusing on her recent reference to the famous formula of Melville's *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, thereby completing our search for the philosophy of Barbara Cassin.

### Epistemology/Doxology vs Ontology/Logology

When Plato – as is the ruling theory today – coined the concept of rhetoric in his dialogue *Gorgias* he also would come to define the battle between rhetoric and its counterpart philosophy as revolving around the question of knowledge. In what is certainly the most famous part of the dialogue, the analogy comparing the true and false arts of the soul (or politics) with those of the body, it becomes clear how the opposition between the arts focused on investigating the ways to uncover the best [βέλτιστος] alternative (i.e. the best treatment in medicine; the best exercise in gymnastics; the best laws in legislation) and those only interested in inducing pleasure in the audience (i.e. cookery, self-adornment, sophistry), circles around the question of how to procure proper knowledge. The epistemological battlefield is to an even greater extent visible in Plato's *Sophist*, as this eponymic figure is separated from its counterpart, the philosopher, on the grounds of the former's ignorance, meaning that the imitations of the world produced by the sophist are not to be considered proper knowledge but simply images arising from "the art of opinion [δοξαστικῆς] which is part of the art of contradiction" (268c-d). Aristotle further canonized the link between the problem of the sophists and rhetoric and the question of knowledge, perhaps best exemplified by the introduction to his *On Sophistical Refutations*. Here, the victims of those who deem it "more profitable to seem to be wise than to be wise" (i.e. sophists) are deceived because they are "unacquainted with

the power of names" and thus unable to detect when they are misled by someone skilled in making use of the ambiguities and homonymities of language (Aristotle 165a). The attempt to exclude or to domesticate these slippages of language has, ever since, been central to what Cassin calls philosophy's aim to master rhetoric, perhaps most clearly shown in her reading of Aristotle's formulation of the law of non-contradiction. Here, Cassin meticulously uncovers how Aristotle offers us not simply a rule of logic, but rather a law intended to regulate speech itself, designed to exclude from humanity those who insist on making use of the ambiguities of language. Cassin's fierce critique of the Aristotelian perspective especially comes to the fore in her examinations and re-readings of the discipline's history, through which she shows how the legacy of Aristotle's exclusion of the sophists, branding them as speaking plants, continuously echoes today (cf. Cassin, "Esquisse"). As Cassin has pointed out, one of the major effects of Aristotle's formulation of the law of non-contradiction can be found in the fact that the fundamental question for rhetoricians since the times of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* has been to decide whether or not the discipline itself is capable of managing the threats against knowledge posed by ambiguity and polysemy or if it requires the helping hand of philosophy. This problem keeps returning up until modernity and the offered solution remains more or less the same. Within the Scottish Enlightenment, often hailed for a positive view of rhetoric, it was a commonly held idea that the most pressing matter for rhetoric consisted in developing a "perspicuity of style" which "requires not only that the expressions we use should be free from all ambiguity proceeding from synonymous words but that the words should be natives if I may (say) so of the language we speak in" (Smith 51). Thus, in spite of the hope of thinkers such as Adam Smith and George Campbell that rhetoric could save language from ambiguity and polysemy, the issue has always been that the arguments advanced by those in favour of rhetoric could just as well be used by those intending to dismiss it. Among the most famous of these modern critics was Kant, who, despite including rhetoric among the beautiful arts, defining it as "a play with ideas in order to entertain the audience" (Kant 198), nevertheless felt inclined to issue a warning to those who would allow rhetoric to overstep its boundaries and the devastating effects that this could have on knowledge:

Rhetoric, insofar as by that is understood the art of persuasion, i.e., of deceiving by means of beautiful illusion (as an *ars oratoria*), and not merely skill in speaking (eloquence and style), is a dialectic, which borrows from the art of poetry only as much as is necessary to win minds over to the advantage of the speaker before they can judge and to rob them of their freedom; thus it cannot be recommended either for the courtroom or for the pulpit. For when it is a matter of civil laws concerning the rights of individual persons, or of the lasting instruction and determination of minds to correct knowledge and conscientious observation of their duty, then it is beneath the dignity of such an important business to allow even a trace of exuberance of wit and

imagination to be glimpsed, let alone of the art of persuasion and taking someone in for the advantage of someone else. (Kant 204)

In a manner reminiscent of Aristotle, Enlightenment thinkers emphasised the need for clarity and precision against the threats of ambiguity and equivocity, and similar to how it was treated in antiquity, the figure of rhetoric can in such circumstances be invoked as either the main target of critique or as a solution to the dilemma. Thus, the epistemological battle initiated by Plato had, at that point, been going on for millennia, and it is here that Cassin shows us that this dialectic must be broken if we aspire to escape the grip of the Platonic question.

With what some have labelled "the rhetorical turn"<sup>3</sup> – taking off during the second half of the twentieth century with the publication of two now classical works in modern Rhetorical Studies, Kenneth Burke's *A Rhetoric of Motives* and Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca's *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation* – a critique of this limited understanding of rhetoric and ambiguity associated with Enlightenment thought was thoroughly developed. This turn has been described as constituting an attempt "to counterpose rhetorical perspectives on inquiry against the dominant objectivist presuppositions of our age" (Simons, 1), partaking in a general development of questioning the purported certainty and universality of truth in order to fashion a broader, potentially more inclusive, vision of it. At the heart, this critique attacked the perception that ideas are initially formed in thought before they are expressed in words, a view which also presupposes a gap between language and knowledge ripe for exploitation by sophists. This supposed dilemma, defined by Paul Ricoeur in a chapter on the decline of rhetoric as "the tyranny of the word", opens up for the false distinction between literal and figurative meaning and the subsequent dismissal of the so-called rhetorical aspects of language. It was against this that the new rhetoricians proclaimed rhetoricity as inherent not only to all human language but also to thought itself. Tzvetan Todorov for instance described how modernity made this false distinction possible through two lines of development which together contributed to rhetoric's decline. Primarily, modernity required the abolition of certain established hierarchies of form (installing a world "without God" where deviating modes of expressions constitute a threat) and, secondly, it saw the victory of empiricism over rationalism, which made the panchronic nature of rhetoric irrelevant, instead favouring a more synchronic approach to the history of linguistic forms. Thus, as Todorov notes, "[t]hese two movements – the refusal of the couple norm-deviance, the eviction of panchronic constructions in favour of history, have, as we easily can see, a common source: it is the disappearance of absolute and transcendental values, with which one could compare (and to which one could reduce) particular facts" (138-139). What Todorov illustrates is how the battle between rhetoric and philosophy consistently have been portrayed as taking place on the level of epistemology. Hence, although the new rhetoricians embraced the flux and kairotic nature of rhetoricized forms of knowledge, dismissing the traditional distinction between ambiguous and true language, their critique remained within a dialectic inaugurated by Plato. The

rhetorical turn, in other words, might have brought with it a new way of reversing Plato and Aristotle's philosophical critique of rhetoric, highlighting the inescapable equivocity and figurativeness of language. But this critique nevertheless remained within pre-sets once established in *Gorgias*. Against the eternal Truths of ideas, and the wisdom that comes from possessing knowledge about them, rhetorical epistemology is said to highlight the temporal, historical, and linguistic aspects of knowing: "[K]nowledge, or the explanation of something through its cause, constitutes a process which is as such of a temporal nature, for as something that has happened it is a historical phenomenon which has passed through different moments in time" (Grassi 20). However, simply reversing the condemnation of philosophy – a strategy which, as Cassin often highlights, has been continuously employed by rhetoricians and sophists throughout history – does not solve the fundamental problem arising from the way in which Plato formulated the question itself, thus leaving the field open for philosophy's inevitable re-reversal (Cassin, "Esquisse" 33–36). It is at this point that Cassin's rereading of *Gorgias* enters.

Although Cassin's work should undoubtedly be counted among the many scholars who turned to rhetoric for a different understanding of knowledge, what she ended up offering was not simply another reversal of Plato's or even Aristotle's philosophical epistemology. Instead, she transformed the entire battlefield. This can be seen already in her dissertation, published as *Si Parménide* in 1980, initiated by the following words: "Philology or philosophy. 'If Parmenides': it is about ontology, sophistic, doxography" (Cassin, *Si Parménide* 19). What Cassin here showed, in a reading of the anonymous treatises *On Melissus, Xenophanes, and Gorgias*, was how Plato's critique of rhetoric, although perhaps the term's birthplace, did not constitute the point of departure for the struggle between sophistic and philosophy *tout court*. Rather, throughout her work she has tirelessly illustrated – in readings of everyone from Plato and Aristotle to Habermas and Heidegger – how philosophy keeps struggling with the problems set in motion by a much older text, *Gorgias*' answer to the poem of Parmenides. She writes:

The sophistic discourse, which supports the insupportable, produces in this way the origin as a "sophism", in the most banal sense of the term: as a dissimulation and an exploitation of the equivocal, analogue to that of which the doxographer blamed Gorgias. The *Treatise* [by Gorgias], which could only be written after the origin and in order to support it, appears, however, as a foundation, requisite, condition of possibility, origin of this origin, arch-origin, the ground against which the origin can be traced as a sophistic *coup de force* necessary for that which follows it, namely ontology. (Cassin, *Si Parménide* 61–62)

What Cassin offers is, here, not just another reversal of Plato's condemnation of rhetoric and ambiguity in *Gorgias*. Rather, through her reading of *Gorgias*' negation of Parmenides' dismissal of that which is not, Cassin is able to show how Plato's discourse on rhetoric is predicated on how the sophist had already turned the poem's ontology upside down, making the equation of thought and

being impossible. Plato's epistemological critique of rhetoric was, in other words, only possible against the background of the failure of Parmenides' original philosophical ontology and his dialogues are nothing more than an answer to the scandal caused by the smooth talker from Leontini. Hence, one of Cassin's most important contributions and, one might claim, a fundamental thesis defining her intellectual *oeuvre*, is: "If Parmenides...then Gorgias". Rhetoric can no longer only be the name for a potentially unbridgeable gap between knowing and speaking or between thoughts and words. The opposition is no longer between *doxa* and *epistêmê*, but, as Cassin would put it, between philosophical ontology and sophistic logology. Rhetoric, as a name, hides an attempt to philosophically overcome an impossibility in being itself, the fact that being and non-being is in the same way.

### Sophistical politics?

By redefining the battleground, moving from the opposition between epistemology and doxology to one between ontology and logology, Cassin's depiction of the problems surrounding philosophy and rhetoric also has effects on her conception of the political. It is, in other words, here that we find the world-effect produced by her thought, and in order to understand these consequences, let us begin by comparing Cassin's rereading to another conception of the political recovered from the classical battle between sophists and philosophers. In Foucault's now famous return to Greece, and his reading of the concept *parrhêsia*, we find a depiction of the Greek political situation of the late fifth and early fourth century BC that shares many similarities with that of Cassin. However, despite these similarities, they both draw from this narrative completely opposite conclusions. Similar to the effects produced by Cassin's move from epistemology to ontology, Foucault's rereading of the battle between rhetoric and philosophy no longer presents us with the familiar struggle between the democratic sophists and the aristocratic or authoritarian philosophers, between the fluctuation and instability of public opinion and the rigidity of philosophical truths. Instead, we are presented with a perspective on these turbulent times – which would come to mark the end of the Athenian golden age – in which Plato plays the role of a radical. Scarred by his experiences under the Thirty Tyrants, Socrates' death sentence, and his own voyage to Syracuse, Plato no longer appears to us in the now familiar rhetorical history as the philosopher of eternal truths, fighting a losing battle for the traditional hierarchical values against the freedom of democracy. Rather, Plato is presented as someone who attempts to think public life at a crossroad, where both classical democracy and traditional authority had been confronted with their respective limits. In many ways, Foucault's final lectures on the governing of the self and others seem to point to a certain analogy between the problems forcing Plato to develop his (political) philosophy and those that had begun to proliferate in the West at the end of *Les trentes glorieuses*, namely the problem of the people's sovereignty and the role of truth within democracy.

Although she names Foucault as one of the potential "antidoters" capable of loosening Heidegger's firm grip on continental philosophy, Cassin nevertheless delivered a harsh sentence over his final lectures (first published in French in 2008-2009), dismissing them as being "conventional" and offering yet another attempt to turn politics into the slave of ontology (Cassin, *Sophistical Practice* 9). When focusing solely upon Foucault's depiction of the battle between Platonic philosophy and sophistic rhetoric, such a reading is clearly not only possible, but perhaps even probable:

You can see then how the practice of *parrhêsia* is opposed to the art of rhetoric in every respect. Very schematically, we can say that rhetoric, as it was defined and practiced in Antiquity, is basically a technique concerning the way that things are said, but does not in any way determine the relations between the person who speaks and what he says. Rhetoric is an art, a technique, a set of processes which enable the person speaking to say something which may not be what he thinks at all, but whose effect will be to produce convictions, induce certain conducts, or instil certain beliefs in the person [to whom he speaks]. In other words, rhetoric does not involve any bond of belief between the person speaking and what he [states]. The good rhetorician, the good rhetor is the man who may well say, and who is perfectly capable of saying, something completely different from what he knows, believes, and thinks, but of saying it in such a way that, in the final analysis, what he says – which is not what he believes, thinks, or knows – becomes what those he has spoken to think, believe, and think they know. The connection between the person speaking and what he says is broken in rhetoric, but the effect of rhetoric is to establish a constraining bond between what is said and the person or persons to whom it is said. You can see that from this point of view rhetoric is the exact opposite of *parrhêsia* [...]. (Foucault 13)

Against this depiction, highlighting how rhetoric breaks the bond between the speaker and the truth of what is spoken, one can imagine how Cassin would summon many of her now well-known formulas criticizing philosophy's attempts to master politics: from its problematic retreat to intention, via its inevitable authoritarian tendencies, to its obsession with trying to reach the Truth and the Oneness of Being. Furthermore, one can imagine that Foucault's explicit opposition between performative and *parrhêsian* speech in some of his lectures might be another site of contention for Cassin, in particular his depiction of the latter as "the ethics of truth-telling as an action which is risky and free" against the performative as "carried out in a world which guarantees that saying effectuates what is said" (Foucault 61, 66). Although Foucault, in this opposition, definitely captures the nature of what Austin calls the illocutionary act, the kind of performative which is dependent upon an existing institutional network in order to have effect, Cassin would nonetheless point out that Foucault, in this dismissal, overlooks the "missing third", the perlocutionary speech act which does things "by speaking" and as such is fully dependent upon the audience in order to produce effects. Here, the

possible coincidence of what Cassin calls the sophistic performative and Foucault's *parrhêsiasitic* speech – the one that makes “a passage from the communion in the values of the community [...] to the creation of new values” (Cassin, *Sophistical Practice* 216) and the one which “creates a fracture and opens up the risk: a possibility, a field of dangers, or at any rate, an undefined eventuality” (Foucault 63) – might tell us something about the joint core of their respective understanding of the political.

When Foucault dedicated his first lectures of 1983 not to some Greek text, but to Kant's *Was ist Aufklärung?*, he attempted to formulate the problem around which his two final lecture series would revolve: the question of the present. Central to this is the claim that the manner in which Kant is confronting his own times is radically different from those adopted by his forerunners such as Descartes or Leibnitz. No longer is Kant, according to Foucault, a philosopher who investigates the present as a basis for a “philosophical decision”, such as was common in Early Modern philosophy. Instead, Kant treats the present and its problems as belonging to philosophy in their own rights. What Kant reintroduced was a certain stance of philosophy in relation to the political which Foucault also found in the philosophical understanding of *parrhêsia*. In Plato's *Gorgias*, Socrates brings up *parrhêsia* – together with knowledge (*epistêmê*) and goodwill (*eúnoia*) – when praising Callicles for possessing traits which not only makes him a good friend, but an excellent touch stone against which to test the quality of one's soul (487a). Foucault here points to the juridical theme of the dialogue, meaning that the greatest need for a friend like Callicles arises when one has erred, signifying, as Foucault puts it, “that in this passage the mode of being of philosophical discourse and its way of binding the soul to, at the same time, truth, Being (what is), and the Other are defined, albeit rapidly and in a, so to speak, purely methodological way (as rules of the discussion)” (366). It is, in other words, in relation to what is presented by Plato as the rhetorical focus on effect – meaning the attempt to win support for the case of the speaker regardless of whether or not he comprehends or believes in the arguments he is putting forth – that the philosophical frank speech is developed as an alternative, not to focus on the will of the speaker but on the betterment of the community. Philosophy is not only using the present as a starting point, it treats the here and now as a problem for reflection. Despite his critical perspective on rhetoric, the distinction offered by Foucault captures the connection between *parrhêsia* and the sophistic performative. In what is referred to as Protagoras' apology, often quoted by Cassin, Socrates seems to once again describe this function of acquiring wisdom or improving erroneous ways through a truthful yet risky act, this time by the help of an analogy between the teacher (*sophistês*) and the physician. Socrates' point is that both figures aim at producing a change “from a worse to a better condition”, the former with the help of *logos* and the latter with the use of drugs (*pharmakon*) (Plato, “Theaetetus” 167a). However, just as is the case with *parrhêsia*, such an act also includes a certain risk since the drug can turn into a poison and the teachings might turn the student into a

dishonest man. For Cassin, this means that the change is not based in eternal truths (since that would remove the element of risk). Instead, it is to be established through what she calls "enough of the truth for...", meaning a truth which is true enough (i.e. appears believable) to have the desired effect, namely to bring the community from a worse to a better condition. She writes:

The foremost cultural politics does not consist in universally imposing the truth or in imposing the universal truth. It consists in different ways of aiding us to choose the best, and it is this, in my opinion, that constitutes a culture of peace: different ways of aiding us to choose the best. In other words, the universal is, in my eyes as a femme-philosopher, a strategy more than a value in itself definitive or ultimate; or rather, the best universal is complex, multiple, relative. (Badiou and Cassin 176)

This political practice of truth-telling finds its ground in a *kairotic* truth, drawing its powers from the specific circumstances in which it can act as "enough of the truth" in order to bring betterment. Compare this description of the practice of truth-telling to the one presented by Foucault when opposing the *parrhesiastic* speech act to the Austinian understanding of the performative:

In a performative utterance, the given elements of the situation are such that when the utterance is made, the effect which follows is known and ordered in advance, it is codified, and this is precisely what constitutes the performative character of the utterance. In *parrhêsia*, on the other hand, whatever the usual, familiar, and quasi institutionalized character of the situation in which it is effectuated, what makes it *parrhêsia*, is that the introduction, the irruption of the true discourse determines an open situation, or rather opens the situation and makes possible effects which are, precisely, not known. *Parrhêsia* does not produce a codified effect; it opens up an unspecified risk. And this unspecified risk is obviously a function of the elements of the situation. (Foucault 62)

This distinction between the effect dependent on the circumstances and the effect tied to the immediate risk is also present in Cassin's understanding of *kairos* as a target, describing this Greek word as a "term that designates a critical point of cut-off and opening, the opening of a discontinuity within a continuum, the gap in time within the space or a temporal time within the spatialized time" (Cassin, *L'archipel* 44). Hence, the *parrhesiastic* and the sophistic acts seem to share a similar relationship to truth, expressing it in a state where its value as truth cannot be decided beforehand, opposing it to the stable, the unchangeable, and the calculable.

The outlook shared by Foucault and Cassin is one we might call, borrowing Butler's formula, a politics of the performative, meaning it "has its own social temporality in which it remains enabled precisely by the contexts from which it breaks" (Butler 40). Thus, Cassin and Foucault both share in an attempt to locate a properly transformative politics in the performative ability to utilize the gap inherent in the present order which bears with it the potentiality to bring about something new.

As they also highlight in their respective work, such an act is intrinsically bound up with a risk, since failing to instantiate change threatens to leave the subject alone and vulnerable outside the system, a position which could be illustrated both by Plato, risking his life by speaking out at the Tyrant's court in Syracuse, and those who were branded as sophists and subsequently excluded from humanity as mere "speaking plants".<sup>4</sup> However, by bringing up Butler, one is also forced to acknowledge a difficult question confronting any politics of the performative: how are we to separate the performative that brings us from a worse to a better condition from one that would potentially deteriorate the current state even further? Just as a skilled physician is capable of deciding how much of a drug would make it poisonous, the speaker must be aware of just how much of the truth is needed in a specific situation. Or to put it in the words of Cassin – when she in one of her more recent books brings this problem to our attention by referencing Butler – "when one does things with words, what becomes truth?" (Cassin, *Quand* 214). Should and could a politics of the performative, in line with arguments put forth in the name of rhetoric from Plato and onwards, only concern itself with effects? And if so, where are we to locate these effects? Perhaps in the *doxa* of the political community or, following Foucault, in *parrhêsia*, "in the effect that its specific truth-telling may have on the speaker, in the possible backlash on the speaker from the effect it has on the interlocutor" (Foucault 56). Cassin here seems to agree with the latter option:

With the performative, truth finds itself after happiness: when the performative is happy, the constative that it becomes is therefore true. This "revolution" is congruent with the one Lyotard operates with in *Le Différend*: it is not because someone is the president that the meeting is declared open, it is because the meeting is open when he says it, that he is/will have been the president. (Cassin, *Quand* 219)

Truth is, as Cassin puts it, "downgraded" to a secondary function, only visible after the performative has taken effect. In other words, only if the performative achieves what Austin calls happiness can it also establish itself as a truth. It thus appears as if, for both Cassin and Foucault, speech that is truly subversive can appear as truthful only after it has already taken effect, meaning that this speech is beneficial for the community on the basis of having an effect rather than on the basis of an already inherent value. Rather than simply telling the crowd what it already wanted to hear, a truth (and a truly persuasive speech act) can only be recognized after being spoken, turning rhetoric as an art of persuasion on its head. It is here that we can establish the connection between antiquity and the present times, at least according to Cassin and Foucault, namely that the master's speech is exclusively used to achieve already established effects. It is today more profitable to reap the small rewards without a risk than to confront the gap itself.

The difference between Foucault's philosophical and Cassin's sophistic politics seems to hinge on the question that Kant first confronted in his text on the Enlightenment, namely: who is capable of releasing humanity from our "self-incurred immaturity"? The performative required to release a subject from its

current state is thus dependent upon an ethical stance and the question that divides the two is if this position is completely internal to language itself, requiring a sophist in possession of the knowledge on how to make use of it, or if this internality needs to be paired with a philosopher, someone who remains at once outside of as well as tied to the community. This question of the position finally takes us back to Cassin's idea that phobia should define this figure, forcing us to ask how the Master should be provoked in order to open a space for a new truth.

### Bartleby's Truth, or the Fear of Hegel

The scrivener Bartleby, appearing in the eponymous short-story by Herman Melville, has today become somewhat of a household name in philosophy, and his famous phrase "I would prefer not to" has come to be hailed as words of resistance. Regularly read in relation to religious figures, ranging from Christ (Deleuze), via Job and Abraham (Derrida), to Zarathustra (Rancière), the awkwardly formulated response/resistance of this faceless character is often depicted as a negation with the potential of releasing us from our current predicaments. In a recent conversation, Alain Badiou confronted Cassin with the claim that she, despite her efforts to escape it, remains part of a philosophical tradition harking back to Plato. In her response, Cassin stated that it is important to

[u]nderstand that I never cease to not, *I would prefer not to*, just like that. And it does not matter that Bartleby has become the most trivial of appeals, a kind of banality of evil. Yes, I really would like to call myself phobic of mastery and incarnation. Maybe this is in any way the first thing to underline: phobic rather than hysteric. (Badiou and Cassin 40)

Given Cassin's line of argument, it is perhaps initially important to note, as does Deleuze, that it is not really the scrivener, but rather his employer, the lawyer, that appears to be the story's hystericized subject: the lawyer's incapability to deal with his employee's odd non-response to any command appears to be bringing the entire world of the newly-appointed Master in Chancery to the brink of collapse, ultimately forcing him on the run in an attempt to escape his own scrivener. Hence, Cassin's identification with Bartleby's formula could undoubtedly be read in a Deleuzian fashion, highlighting how the initial harmony of the office – the two copyists taking turns being unreasonable, one before and the other after lunch, all under the watchful eye of the father-attorney – swiftly withers away when faced with Bartleby's strange refusal. One might assume, therefore, that Cassin's invocation of Bartleby's "queer word", together with her depiction of herself as a phobic, points to an understanding of the present situation as one in which the need is not to hysterically question the Master in order to force him to admit his impotence, but rather to hystericize the Master through phobia, thus forcing him to overthrow the system himself in the attempt to re-establish the stability of meaning lost in hysteria. Furthermore, could we not also claim that Cassin's

Gorgias constitutes yet another exemplary figure of what Deleuze, in his reading of Bartleby's formula, calls an Original, someone who can "reveal [the world's] emptiness, the imperfection of its law, the mediocrity of particular creatures...the world as masquerade" (83), not through force or radical questioning, but simply by stating that which seems to, within the confines of the current order, make sense and non-sense at the same time? As such, Bartleby's "I would prefer not to", directed to his employer, would be the equivalent of Gorgias' ambiguous answer to Parmenides regarding the nature of being and non-being. But is Bartleby really a phobic, or could Cassin's use of Bartleby's formula perhaps reveal one of the limits of the philosophy of Barbara Cassin?

Although Lacan, at times, appeared hesitant with regards to the functioning of phobia within his theory, the sixteenth seminar nevertheless provides us with a very clear distinction: "Phobia is not at all to be seen as a clinical entity, but as a turntable [*plaque tournante*]" (Lacan 307).<sup>5</sup> Following Lacanian nosography, one could thus claim that Cassin's opposition between phobia and hysteria is a false one, since only hysteria is to be considered a proper clinical structure. Instead of constituting a clinical structure, something which would entail offering a fantasy to the subject as a defence against castration, phobia, as Lacan puts it, consists in "substituting the object of anxiety for a signifier that incites fear" (307). Hence, phobia appears to serve a more primary function, wherein the subject, instead of being engulfed by a threatening anxiety (the lack as lacking), replaces the unknown object of anxiety (what does the Other want from me?) with a clearly defined signifier of phobia. Furthermore, this role would also illustrate how phobia acts as a turntable, bringing the subject from a general and overbearing anxiety to a demarcated and specific phobia without necessarily deciding *how* this subject will relate to it, or, in other words, without offering a specific fantasy (neurotic or perverse) in which the object of phobia receives its proper functioning as part of the fantasmatic screen set out to protect the subject. If we accept Cassin's claim that her thinking is phobic rather than hysterical, one could perhaps claim that her understanding of Gorgias (or Bartleby) brings us one step closer to the core of the Other: by avoiding the negation – denying (neurosis) or disavowing (perversion) the original impossibility – which would force us into a specific clinical structure, phobia remains closer to the Other that incites our anxiety in the first place. By 'preferring not to', Cassin tries to remain within phobia without incorporating it into a neurotic or perverse fantasy nor expelling it through foreclosure (which would lead to psychosis). As such, a phobic philosophy could perhaps be defined by the attempt to revel in the ambiguities and uncertainties offered by this spinning plate. But does phobia really offer any emancipatory potential?

Kristeva, in her famous essay *Powers of Horror*, develops the concept of abjection precisely as a necessary protection against the destructive threat posed by phobia and psychosis: without abjection the subject is "risking the loss not of a part (castration) but of the totality of his living being" (39). Together, Kristeva and Cassin offer two opposite understandings of phobia, one praising it as the only way to avoid

the Master's grip, the other dismissing it as a threat against the very possibility of life. However, both sides still assume that the Master is a given, something which we either resist (through staying in phobia) or escape (through abjection). And it is precisely this genetic understanding that Lacan warns us against when introducing the discussion that eventually leads us to his claims regarding phobia. Here, in a discussion of Hegel's Master and slave dialectics and the origin of desire, Lacan points us to the fact that the Master is not present already from the beginning. Rather, he only appears at the point of separation between knowledge and power (273–74). Thus, perhaps this phobia of Mastery, the fear of committing the philosopher's mistake of trying to master the world, is in itself part of the problem, meaning that the "fear of erring is already the error itself" (Hegel §74). The phobia of mastery is, in other words, not a way of avoiding, and thereby undermining, the Master, forcing him to dismantle the system in a hysterical fit worthy of Bartleby's employer. Instead, remaining in phobia appears as an attempt to avoid the choice that has already been made; the fact that the Master (or the chicken) emerge as the signifier of fear means that we have already made a choice confronted with the void of the Other's desire. In other words, the fear of giving in to the Master has the opposite effect, it strengthens his grip on the subject.

Thus, in designating the Other as the phobic object, have we not already accepted that fear has a clearly defined point of origin? And was this not, as we have seen, precisely this issue that haunted the rhetorical turn up until Cassin's reading of Gorgias? The fact that Plato's philosophical mastery was accepted as the phobic object par excellence meant that there was a constant fear that his critique remained lurking in the shadows, waiting to return with a vengeance. And by, in the last instance, committing to the phobic object, could we not claim that Cassin, when trying to escape the truth of her own philosophy by avoiding mastery, is betraying the figure of Gorgias (this masterful speaker) she has so meticulously been extracting from his fragments. This is the same phobia that Hegel speaks about in the introduction to *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, one that assumes the existence of the mistake that it seeks to avoid. Perhaps is this also why Hegel, throughout Cassin's *oeuvre*, keeps returning as the incarnation of her own phobic object. But what appears as Hegel's attempt at mastery is nothing but the final dialectical reversal of what Gorgias once set in motion: that what appears as the eternal question regarding where to locate the fundamental lack, in being or in truth, in the pragmatics of sophistry or the idealism of philosophy, in the passing opinions of the *dêmos* or the eternal knowledge of the *idea*, is simply taking "as the *defect* of the two" what "is their very soul or is what moves them" (Hegel §23). Faced with the question concerning Cassin's philosophy, rather than taking up the phobic approach of Bartleby, it is perhaps wiser to heed Badiou's words of warning regarding the scrivener: "One can, like the office clerk Bartleby in Melville's eponymous novella, 'prefer not to'. But then truth will be sacrificed by its very

subject. Betrayal." (400) Only by taking this further step can we fully appreciate the world-effect of Barbara Cassin's philosophy.

### Notes

1. This work was supported by The Swedish Research Council's International Postdoc-programme [ref. nr.: 2021-00299\_VR].
2. Here we should add that Rhetorical Studies, especially in North America, has been obsessed with the idea of formulating a rhetorical theory or perhaps a Theory of Rhetoric capable of competing with philosophy for the title of king over the humanities.
3. A term which, it is often claimed, was coined in the 1980s by Richard Rorty.
4. Here we should perhaps note that, at least according to Philostratos, being branded as a sophist would prohibit someone from partaking in the city's trials.
5. Bruce Fink for instance counts phobia as one of three subcategories of neurosis, meaning that it, like hysteria and obsession, is a specific form of neurotic structure (13). Such an understanding is, first and foremost, based on Lacan's comments in the sixth seminar, and although he, in the sixteenth seminar, withholds that phobia is more closely linked to hysteria and neurotic obsession, he explicitly states that phobia is also related to perversion (307).

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