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THE PERFORMATIVE ACT

*Discourse, Being and Temporality in Psychoanalysis*

*There is no one who can call himself master of his act*  
J. Lacan

*Discourse extracts the power of time as it is never present*  
B. Cassin

The discourse that Freud found depends on the device that he invented. This issue leads Lacan to pose, in his seminar *The Psychoanalytic Act*, the following question: did the unconscious exist before psychoanalysis was created? (1967-1968). In the course of that seminar we observe an answer that already appeared insinuated in the very formulation of the question: the psychoanalytic act is constitutive of the unconscious. And this has a strict relation to the fact that the status of the unconscious is eminently discursive. In the appropriate psychoanalytic sense, it is founded by a peculiar praxis of the word, which implies leaving behind ontological approaches to the unconscious structure.

The assertion that the unconscious in general did not exist before the invention of the psychoanalytic device must be extended to the existence of each singular unconscious (if the praxis of psychoanalysis, which implies fundamentally a particular kind of *discursive bond*, makes it possible to speak in these terms). No singular unconscious exists, *stricto sensu*, before an analysand emerges from the psychoanalytic experience.

It is true, though, that in a certain dimension, the pre-analytic unconscious exists. Some formations, which do not wait for the analytic device to manifest themselves, allow us to witness its effects; namely the lapsus, the dream and the joke (*Witz*). However, they manifest the unconscious as a pure phenomenal expression, that exists independently of the temporality of the psychoanalytic act. In those cases, with the exception of the phenomenon of the joke, the unconscious is revealed in a larval state, in a kind of timeless limbo, as if it could be independent of the Other's sanction. As we will see below, if the joke occupies a special place with respect to the rest, it is because it implies, even though it is prior to psychoanalytic experience, a peculiar sort of performative act.

The insertion of the analyst in a certain relationship with that unconscious is a necessary condition for working in psychoanalytic praxis with the unconstituted structure, in what is seen as the root of the efficacy of the transference. This gives rise to a peculiar formation by which the analyst will appear in the structure of the subject like Velázquez in the painting *Las meninas* (*Seminar XV*). The expression “unrealized” (*non-réalisé*) that Lacan had introduced in his eleventh seminar makes it possible to specify the non-ontological status of the unconscious, “neither being, nor non-being” (*The Four Fundamental Concepts* 30). But it is also fundamental to clarify the pre-analytic dimension of the unconscious as something that, in a certain way, is independent of the act.

The dependence of the unconscious on the act does not prevent the problematization of the unconscious in its crude state of existence, that is, as something exclusively pre-analytic which has a particular relationship with the dimension of being. As we will see, the Lacanian concept of phantasy is fundamental for addressing the problem of this peculiar *pre-discursive dimension of being*. The phantasy allows us to account for that dimension of non-realization of the unconscious in its peculiar impact on the being of the subject.

### The Status of Being in Psychoanalysis and its Relations to the Subject

It is not simple to approach the status of being in psychoanalysis. To do so, it is necessary to show first that being must be related to the dimension of an unborn subject, namely of a subject that is beyond the strict psychoanalytic conception of this notion, which depends on the splitting effect associated to the act of speech. On the contrary, strictly speaking, the unborn subject, related to the pre-analytic dimension, does not really exist in the dimension of the act.

To consider the split subject of psychoanalysis in its relationship with being, we have to consider to what extent its path through existence is paradoxical: the act makes the subject appear in its disappearance. The act of speech that makes the split subject possible shows that the latter only emerges with the dissolution of its pre-analytic being. To explain this, we must consider Lacan’s early use of the Cartesian *cogito* to detach being from thought. His essay entitled “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud” allows us to see how the subject appears neither in relation to the I who declares the act of thinking, nor in connection to the I that proclaims its being, but instead as the effect of the distance between them: “I am thinking where I am not, therefore I am where I am not thinking”, as Lacan will conclude. In this regard, a few lines later he specifies: “I am not, where I am the plaything of my thought; I think about what I am where I do not think I am thinking” (430). This is crucial because it allows us to examine the foundation for another conception of being in the statement ‘I am thinking, therefore I am’ (*cogito, ergo sum*) enunciated by Descartes. Therefore, we should not consider it simply as “the formulation in which the link between the transparency of the transcendental

subject and his existential affirmation is constituted” (429). On the contrary, “there is no subject without, somewhere, *aphanisis* of the subject”, as Lacan put it later in the eleventh Book of his seminar (*The Four Fundamental Concepts* 221).

What should we understand by being then? At its pre-analytic level, being is something mythical in a way because it does not really exist in the dimension of the act. In this sense, being is related to a pre-discursive dimension in which *jouissance* has not yet been, strictly speaking, separated from desire. In a way, we can consider this dimension, as we will see better later, as sediments of sense and *jouissance* related to prior effects of discourse. We will show that we can only introduce the discursive dimension of the subject from the loss of being (and in this sense, the idea of an *unborn being* could be considered, from our perspective, as a kind of pleonasm).

Paradoxically, at the discursive level, being is something that must arise under the condition of its loss. The “syncope of discourse” leads Lacan to propose the “dimension of synchrony” in order to situate the unconscious in connection with being “at the level of the subject of enunciation, in so far as [...] it loses itself as much as it finds itself again” (*The Four Fundamental Concepts* 26). The scheme of the Alienation, presented by Lacan in the Book 11 of his seminar, is formed by the split between Being (in the field of the Subject) and Meaning – or Sense – (in the field of the Other). Alienation is related to this particular *vel* which “condemns the subject to appearing only in that division which [...] if it appears on one side as meaning, produced by the signifier, it appears on the other as *aphanisis*” (210).

Of the different ways in which the problem of being could be approached, we would like now to focus briefly on the difference between having and being an object, which relates to the distinction between identification and object choice made by Freud in his essay *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. To establish a kind of relationship with an object through desire, the dimension of having an object must prevail over the level of being an object. The subject of desire emerges, paradoxically, with the rejection of being a certain form of object in phantasy. The being which must be lost is precisely the one that the pre-discursive phantasy had created in an imaginary way, as discussed below.

Later we will explain how this allows one to see the status of the subject as the effect of the detachment from being in the dimension of phantasy. This is related to the split produced in the structure of phantasy by the very presence of the analyst through the analytic act: “In a spoken or written sentence something stumbles” (*The Four Fundamental Concepts* 25) and leads to discontinuity and vacillation. If we consider these ideas in connection with the notions of “impediment, failure, split”, it becomes clearer what Lacan meant when he insisted on “the dimension of loss” (25) to consider the status of being in relation to the paradoxical emergence of the subject through its disappearance (which is opposite to the solid place occupied by the subject in the unborn dimension of phantasy).

In order to address the difference between the analytic and the pre-analytic we will consider the phantasy as a pre-discursive *jouissance* of being. In connection to this, we will see why the efficacy of analytic praxis does not lie in creating a new dimension of being through discourse. On the contrary, the analytic work produces an ontological emptying of phantasy. To account for the contrast between these two dimensions of phantasy, we will consider both of the categories taken up by Barbara Cassin: Aristotelian fiction versus Lacan's *fixion* – a neologism that the latter introduced in "*L'étourdit*".

### Between Image and Language: Discursive and Pre-discursive Dimensions

In his foreword to the work of Ludwig Binswanger's *Traum und Existenz*, Michel Foucault speaks of two clearly distinct trends of psychoanalysis, embodied in the names of Jacques Lacan and Melanie Klein. He distinguished them as two opposite poles, determined by the roles that language and image assume in each theory. In Foucault's view, the categories of image and language are in both cases addressed in a defective way as two autonomous orders, because these two psychoanalysts do not achieve the unity between them that he proclaimed (a unity that in fact he finds accomplished in Binswanger's book).

According to the French philosopher, the bipartition corresponds to an unjustified separation of image and language that both analysts inherited from Freud, split now into two different trends of psychoanalysis. Thus, he maintains that Klein did her utmost to indicate the genesis of sense by the mere movement of phantasy. For his part, Lacan did everything that could be done to show how the meaningful dialectic of language is paralyzed in the imago. Based on these ideas, Foucault refutes both trends because of the perpetuation, in opposite ways, of a constitutive failure of psychoanalysis: not having managed to make images speak.

Foucault's considerations emerge from his reading of the status of the imago in a series of Lacanian writings from the late 1940s: "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience", "Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis", "Presentation on Psychical Causality". Foucault's approach to these texts (we will not consider the precision of their reading now) must be considered from the point of view of the unconscious as something that rejects ontology (taking into account later Lacanian considerations). The disjunction between imago and language acquires thus another value.

This allows one to see how this approach anticipated a problem involved in the later Lacanian notion of phantasy. The imago, conceived by Foucault as a limit to the sense that language produces, reveals the germ of a problem that will be assumed by the subsequent theoretical elaboration of phantasy. This problem is intrinsic to the advance of Lacanian teaching since 1956. *Phantasy can be conceived as the limit that the pre-discursive being imposes on the praxis of psychoanalysis*. However, in general terms, phantasy as the limit of discourse is the cause and effect of the discursive

work of an analysis. To analyze this, we need to address the relationships between the unconscious and phantasy both as pre-analytic and analytic phenomena.

The notion of imago (closely associated with specular narcissism) already suggests, in the early Lacanian writings, something that is beyond the narcissistic imaginary. A special example of this is the notion of “imagos of the fragmented body” (*Aggressiveness* 85). These sorts of imagos indicate precisely how the narcissistic imaginary should be intersected by something else to introduce the phantasy in its own psychic status. In the first years of his seminar, Lacan introduced the concept of phantasy as an effect of the relationship of the image to language: “this notion of phantasy therefore as something which no doubt participates in the imaginary order, but which only takes up its function of phantasy in the economy, and wherever it is articulated, through its signifying function” (*Seminar V* 302). Hence, the phantasy results from the confluence of the image with language, but it operates at the intersection. It is a negativity inserted in both registers, withdrawing itself both from the mirror image and from the effectively spoken word, from what is actually uttered.

Juan B. Ritvo shows that the psychoanalytic concept of phantasy can be inscribed in the Western philosophical tradition that goes back to Aristotle. This author points out that this category is, in Western thought, the result of a “mixed dimension made of sensitivity and of understanding”, analogous to some extent to the intersection between the psychoanalytic categories of the Imaginary and the Symbolic (Ritvo 11). We will not elucidate here how this occurs, as we have already considered it in greater detail elsewhere (Carignano 2019). Our purpose is to address now how this paradoxical psychic space of phantasy – in its double character of pre-discursive phenomenon and of retroactive remainder of the discursive work – could be clarified by reference to the difference between the Aristotelian register of fiction and the Lacanian *fixion*, as it operates in the praxis of psychoanalysis.

To account for the status of fiction, it is necessary to start from the following consideration: “the possible assumption of a logology is derived from Aristotelian ontology”. While ontology can be conceived as a discourse that “commemorates being”, whose only “task is to say it”, logology is presented by Barbara Cassin as the creator of being, since it implies that “discourse makes being”; it supposes thus that “being is an effect of saying” (*Efecto* 71). In connection with this, she points out that logology is the “perception of ontology as discourse, this insistence on the performative autonomy of language and on the ‘world-effect’ produced by it” (*Efecto* 19). Logology reveals the discursive foundation of ontology. This peculiar approach to ontology by Aristotle introduces the possibility of existence of sense without essence or “without reference”, which is equal to positing that everything that is said can immediately become being (*Efecto* 54).

If this peculiar aspect of ontology interests us, it is because it allows us to expose some of the features of the pre-discursive dimension that we have just pointed out: the pre-analytic phantasy as a sort of statement that implies the *jouissance* of

a certain relationship with being (from which the dimension of fiction arises). In contrast to this, from the Lacanian category of *fixion* we will see how the work with the unconscious in the analytic device introduces a new relation with being which condition is its loss.

### From Logology to Ontology: Being in the Fiction of Phantasy

Our main objective at this point is to address the peculiar relationship between being and act in psychoanalysis on the basis of two different approaches to phantasy: as a pre-analytic phenomenon and as a belated remainder of discursive work done via the psychoanalytic device.

To begin with, we can start from Cassin's oscillating position on her characterization of the Sophist as a soothsayer, that is, "someone deducing from certain signs knowledge of what is already written" (*Jacques* 35). In this regard, the author argues that, in a certain sense, Sophists are not soothsayers because their function is not to predict a reality that would exist in itself, regardless of the dimension of logos. Now, if we take into account a conception of reality as something that does not exist prior to discourse, the Sophists can be considered, with justified reasons, as soothsayers. "This 'reality,' the 'outside,' in a word 'Being,' far from being anterior, always conforms after the fact to the discourse that has brought about its prediction" (*Jacques* 36). In this case, reality will conform unfailingly to the being that the sophistic discourse institutes. These peculiar soothsayers thus acquire a special power, which resembles that of certain therapists, who also display "the forces of saying in order to induce a new state or a new perception of the world" (*Jacques* 35).

In the case of *fixion*, the fact ceases to be something that would exist per se, it depends on the interpretation which transforms it into an effect of the logos. In the terms of Barbara Cassin, postulating the fact as *fixion* implies that "the subsisting and substantial object disappears, to be replaced by an effect, and the effectiveness of this effect" (*Jacques* 35). We propose to give this statement a wider scope, in order to go beyond this initial postulation, even if it is absolutely necessary: reality does not precede the discourse.

In connection with this, our aim is to reach the exclusive analytic status of the relationship between language, being and act. To accomplish this, we need to show how the substantial object that disappears with *fixion* is not only the one related to the ontology of real things (almost an evidence that goes back to the foundations of psychoanalysis), but the one linked to the category of phantasy, which can be approached from the substance of fiction. In other words, we will focus on the analysis of the effects that the analytic logos has – in its dimension of *fixion* – on the substantial object of the pre-analytic phantasy.

Aristotelian fiction introduces the realm of what does not have a correlate of being in reality and, at this point, covers a field close to that which Freud circumscribed

with the notion of phantasy. With this term Freud indicates something intermediate, a kind of economic reserve comparable to the preservation function that national parks fulfill, against the devastation of nature by civilization (*Formulaciones* 227). It is crucial for our approach to highlight this character of libidinal reserve that phantasy has as a fictional space. This serves to illuminate its mode of operation as a pre-discursive being.

In phantasy, the subject aspires to consummate a being, overcoming the precarious limits that he can reach within the imaginary order (with the sole reaffirmation of his specular narcissism). The scripts of his erotic exploits are written in another domain, and this gives rise to various degrees of phantasy in the psyche, the two extremes of which can be considered day-dreaming and the fundamental unconscious phantasy. The distance between these two registers can be measured with the role that the ego plays to assure the being of the subject. We have then two extremes: on the one hand, the case of day-dreaming, which shows a massive presence of the ego; on the other hand, the fundamental phantasy, in which there is no presence of the ego at all. In this case, the “stuff” or “lining” provided by the partial object is the support of the precarious being of the subject, as can be deduced from Lacan’s considerations in “Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire...” (693).

To achieve the shift from fiction to the psychoanalytic register of fantasies, it is necessary not to understand the reference in its classical Aristotelian sense (as a thing of the world that possesses a being that the sense of the word would only manifest), but rather as an effect of discourse, as François Lyotard puts it in this assertion taken up by Cassin: “It is not the addressee who is seduced by the addressor. The addressor, the referent, and the sense are no less subject than the addressee to the seduction exerted” (*Jacques* 35). The fact that the seduction of the discourse is made on the addressee, but also on the referent itself means that the referent is fully created by the logos and that there is, therefore, no referent outside this sphere.

The word creates the referent, and this specifically means that the realistic logos of ontology creates a precise mode of existence of things. If this concerns us, it is because it allows us to return to the other register – the ontology of fiction – with a fundamental clarification: the logos also constitutes the existence of the fictional itself, which is not autonomous from discourse. In this register, the logos creates the dimension of fiction, which cannot exist on the realistic level of ontology. At this point, the Aristotelian model of the fictional (beyond the initial generic association made above), paves the way for the interrogation of the pre-discursive dimension in psychoanalysis. With the category of fiction we intend to examine some of the characteristics of a pre-discursive being that operates as a sediment of the discourse of the Other and that is independent from the act.

The pre-discursive level is characterized by statements lacking a performative dimension; phantasies are constituted as a libidinal reserve with images and words

which are like accumulated sediments in the dimension of being. The discourse of the Other, which has structuring effects on the constitution of the subject, is retained in this reserve, as if it were transcribed in another register, that of being. Therefore, it is important to consider that the statements that form the phantasy precede the dimension of discourse in which the subject emerges as an effect of enunciation. Phantasy preserves a precarious being for the subject, for which the latter must remain tied to an object in order to subsist (either to the self as a narcissistic object or to the partial object of the drive).

Now, if this proto-phantasy can be circumscribed as sense without reference, it is precisely because it exists prior to the discourse, and does not depend on the act of the word to exist. The phantasy, insofar as it gives rise to a paradoxical psychic space that functions as a refuge for an unborn being (related to the status of unconscious, as we will see it below), is here dissolved in the generic notion of imagination. That being that is not yet born is the one that is assumed by the phantasy in its pre-analytic status. It depends on a dimension of language that is related to being and does not require a performative act to exist. As we will see, the true analytic status is given to the phantasy by the discourse: something that allows a work with being, but in the dimension of its loss. At this point, the phantasy is radically separated from the generic notion of imagination.

Let us think of one of the most famous psychoanalytic phantasies: 'A child is being beaten' (*Ein Kind wird geschlagen*): the *jouissance* of this statement, which finds a masturbatory discharge, does not depend on psychoanalytic praxis for its existence and, therefore, it can be conceived as a refuge for the *jouissance* of a being that is prior to the performative analytic act.

Let's start with the following question: where is the subject in the statement of that phantasy? The person of the fantasizing child no longer comes to light in the beating phantasy; in this regard, Freud only gets this statement from his patients: "I'm probably looking" (Pegan 181-182). The first moment of the phantasy (related to a single beaten child) is transformed into something different because of the presence of many children. Unlike the second – which implies a dual and reciprocal situation between the ego and the other (Lacan, *Seminar IV* 118) – , in this third phase the subject is reduced to its most extreme point: he is apparently in a third position, in the form of a pure and simple observer.

In his seminars, *The Object Relation* and *Formations of the Unconscious*, Lacan indicates that the very structuring of the phantasy supposes a desubjectivation. This can be understood in two different ways, which at one point intersect themselves – but we will not address this issue here: 1) there is no possible link between the subject and the imaginary ego, thus the subject is impossible to identify; 2) the statement in which the phantasy consists is not uttered by anyone, its very grammatical structure does not require anyone to speak; it is thus a statement without the act.

When someone speaks in the analytic experience, the subject may emerge in connection with the phantasy, but it will emerge elsewhere, not in the phantasy

itself. The later developments of the seminars *Anxiety* and *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* allow us to clarify these questions a little further: the subject is represented in the phantasy by an object that divides it. But this Split (*schize*) manifests itself in the unconscious discourse and not in the text of the phantasy. It is necessary that someone speaks in a transference situation so that the Split of the subject appears related to the phantasy, but it will emerge in another dimension, that of unconscious discourse.

### The Treatment of Phantasy in Analysis: Towards the Dissolution of Being

The analytic discourse, which is constituted as a word directed to an Other in transference, leads to the production of the subject as an effect of the detachment from the being of the phantasy. The condition that the analytic device imposes for working with the phantasy is its utterance. Freud points out that very often the confession of phantasy comes with hesitation, and that it is necessary to go through shame and guilt. When speaking of the unspeakable, the subject of the enunciation may appear, which leads to a decomposition of the massive being of the pre-analytic phantasy. The fundamental effect of this is that the pre-discursive being of the phantasmatic statement begins to be treated in the dimension of its loss, which comes to occupy the place of a remainder that the analysis produces (we observe here a close relationship between the object *a* in its function of cause and the loss of being as it operates in analytic discourse).

The fundamental consideration on which our developments are based can then be summarized in the following two points: 1) the dimension of the pre-analytic phantasy is a pre-discursive model of being; 2) the effectiveness of analytic discourse lies in producing the loss of this pre-discursive being.

The pre-analytic phantasy is grammatically constructed as a script (made of unspoken statements). As such, it pre-exists the unconscious discourse that the psychoanalytic practice establishes. As we saw above, this does not mean that the phantasy does not depend for its constitution on a previous discursive dimension that left sediments of sense. At this point, the phantasy meets the generic notion of imagination. However, if the two categories are not equivalent at all, it is because the pre-analytic dimension of phantasy is far from completely covering the concept of phantasy in its specific psychoanalytic dimension.

Let's see how this can be approached from the following Lacanian consideration:

There is a rather remarkable fact to emphasize here. Whereas the masturbatory practices that are more or less associated with these fantasies entail no weight of guilt for subjects, on the contrary, when, it is a question of formulating these fantasies, not only is there very... often great difficulty, but it provokes in them a great sense of aversion, repugnance, guilt. The distance between the phantasmatic or imaginary use of these images and their spoken

formulation is really of a nature to make us prick up our ears. This behavior on the part of the subject is already a signal that marks a limit – it is not the same thing to play mentally with the phantasy and to speak of it (*Seminar IV* 125).

The limit to the meaningful dialectic of language that Foucault boldly reads in Lacan's early writings, specifically pointing out his recourse to the imago, is related to the problem that the subsequent elaboration of the concept of phantasy takes over in Lacan's teaching. From the first approaches of the seminar *The Object Relation* it can be clearly seen how the psychoanalytic discourse is based on the disjunction between image and word. We intend to show why phantasy, as a product of analytic work, is one of the names of this disjunction.

The mental exercise of the phantasy is based on a reluctance to speak. Therefore, phantasy must be distinguished from imagination. This means that without the intervention of the psychoanalytic act, the specificity of the phantasy cannot be fully discerned. It only ends up being constituted as such when the unconscious work of analytic praxis manages to deal with the pre-analytic being. Phenomenologically this is seen in a difficult confession, made of twists and turns, cut by stuttering. Nevertheless, this is important because of its structural scope: pre-analytic phantasy is unspeakable. Analytic praxis introduces a split in that mixture between image and language, performing the loss of that pre-analytic being. In this sense, one of the functions of the word in analysis can be associated with the loss of *jouissance* of the phantasy by the act of saying in transference.

### **The Ontological Failure of the Unconscious Between Phantasy and Act**

The status of the unconscious is ethical; it is therefore neither ontic nor ontological. This precision of Lacan in his eleventh seminar is crucial because it leads to the category "unrealized" (*non-réalisé*) (*The Four Fundamental Concepts*) to account for the temporality of the unconscious.

The aforementioned proposals made by Foucault must be taken up from this perspective, to affirm that the only being that is formed from the confluence between image and language is the pre-analytic phantasy, a being lacking discursive foundation and which can only be accessed indirectly through analytic work. Its condition of emergence is paradoxical: the analytic act introduces a possible approach to the phantasy by dismantling the massive being that is formed at the juncture between image and language, and which gives consistency to the pre-analytic phantasy-imagination.

The psychoanalytic discourse does not look for making the image converge with the word (as Foucault would have liked); on the contrary, it is founded on that impossibility. It is, rather, a performative consummation of it. The analytic discourse proceeds by separating the image from the word, the *jouissance* from desire, the

performativity of the analytic act operates by introducing these disjunctions. We will see this later by focusing on its distinction regarding speech act performativity as approached by Austin.

It is worth remembering the early use that Lacan made of the Cartesian *cogito* to detach being from thought in his essay, “The Instance of the Letter...”; afterwards, in the seminar *The Logic of Phantasy* (and later also in *The Psychoanalytic Act*) this will be refined when he poses the analytic movement in terms of an alternation: “either I do not think or I am not” (*ou je ne pense pas ou je ne suis pas*) (*Seminar XIV* 52). The experience of psychoanalysis teaches that there is no direct approach to being. Rather, the performance of the act shows that in the institution of unconscious discourse the phantasmatic being is worked through the connection with the dimension of not being.

The being of phantasmatic statements does not exist in the register of performative language. This is one of the reasons why it is comparable in some respects to the domain of Aristotelian fiction. The pre-analytic phantasy implies the psychic space of the unborn, of something not yet dominated by the pleasure principle, where certain disjunctions (between word and image, between *jouissance* and desire) have not yet been, in some way, performed by the act. Therefore, this being that appears in phantasy-imagination as given in advance can be related to the “ontological donation” with which Barbara Cassin refutes from the perspective of Sophistry the Aristotelian and Heideggerian interpretations of Parmenides (*Efecto*).

### The Joke as a Discursive Bond with the Other

The relationship of the joke (*mot d'esprit*) to Sophistry, as Cassin explores it, is fundamental because, approached in relation to certain similarities in the treatment of language by Freud and the Sophists, it allows us to highlight how the joke expresses “the truth of desire and frees it from the yoke of critical reason: it is an exercise in freedom” (*Efecto* 208). This is key to understanding how a pre-analytic phenomenon can have the effect of a performative act (in the appropriate analytic sense, as we will examine later) even when it occurs in everyday life, without connection to praxis. The structure of the phenomenon of jokes shows, in some points, a similar way of bonding to the Other as the one that regulates the analytic device. For this reason, in certain way, the joke anticipates the performative dimension of interpretation and transference, which we will consider below.

The developments made by Lacan in his fifth seminar show the strict association between joke (*mot d'esprit*) and witticism (*trait d'esprit*). Both are connected to “the dimension of the alibi of the truth” (*Seminar V* 14). The idea of alibi implies the necessity of “looking elsewhere” (14) to reach the dimension of truth, which is constitutive of the unconscious in act. The message in which the joke consists “is produced at a certain level of signifying production”, it takes the value of a message of its “distinction from the code” (13). In relation to the latter Lacan introduces,

beyond the little other, “the Other as the locus of the word and the guarantor of the truth” (4).

If the joke is crucial to reach the structural status of the unconscious, it is because it allows us to consider, in a phenomenon which occurs outside the practice of psychoanalysis, how the unconscious achieves its full dimension of act. The “verbal technique” of the joke, reformulated by Lacan as a “technique of the signifier” (*Seminar V* 11), shows how the truth of the unconscious can only emerge in connection with a particular bond to the Other through the act of speech. In this sense, the joke establishes a particular bond to the Other that is strictly opposite to that created by pre-analytic phantasy.

Through the act of joking, the truth of the unconscious emerges giving rise to a subject split by its connection with the Other. The “refraction of desire by the signifier happens” in the “seat of the code”. This determines that desire arrives “as signified different from what it was at the beginning”, and this is why Lacan states that “desire is always cuckolded” (*Seminar V* 105). However, he points out, at the same time, that in the witticism “the other ratifies a message as interrupted, as having failed”. The interruption is the sign of the recognition of a dimension that is beyond, “in which the true desire is situated, namely what does not manage to be signified because of the signifier” (106). This statement is crucial because it allows us to see how the tension between the field of the subject and that of the Other is necessary to reach the dimension of the signifier in act through speech, and leads us to consider the divided subject as the result of the alibi of the truth of which we have spoken above.

Now, we would like to briefly show the importance of the status of the *tu* (thou) in the relation to the Other to consider the specificity of a bond which depends on the act of speaking, quite different from the bond to the Other that is established through phantasy in its pre-analytic dimension. In the phantasy there is no *tu* because this term emerges as the crucial manifestation of a bond with the Other determined by speech. The *tu* is a peculiar signifier that introduces a specific level related to the conjunction between the subject, the other and the Other.

This *tu* is absolutely essential in what I called on many occasions the full word, the word in so far as it grounds something in history, the *tu* of ‘thou are my master’, or ‘thou art my wife’. This *tu*, is the signifier of the appeal to the other. (*Seminar V* 107)

At this point, Lacan reminds his audience of the difference he had made in his seminar on psychosis “between *tu es celui qui me suivras*, and the *tu es celui qui me suivra*”. The distance between both statements lies in the distinction between the second and third person of the verb (the third person is a non-existent person, as Émile Benveniste had already shown, it does not depend on the act of enunciation). In both formulations there is an appeal, but while in the assertion *tu es celui qui me suivras* we can see the dimension of the invocation fully displayed, when I say “*Tu*

*es celui qui me suivra*, I do nothing of the kind. I announce, I affirm, I objectify, and even on occasion I reject". In short, it implies a refusal (*Seminar V* 107).

On the contrary, invocation "requires a whole other dimension, namely precisely that I should make my desire depend on your being, in this sense that I call on it to enter onto the path of this desire whatever it may be, in an unconditional way" (*Seminar V* 107). In the invocation process, we appeal to the voice of the *tu* to whom we speak, "it is a question precisely of giving him the same voice that we desire him to have". The peculiar invocation involved in the joke and the witticism – which Lacan specifies as "a provocation which does not succeed by a great display of force, by the great miracle of invocation" (108) – allows us to see the desire in its relationship not to the subject's own being, but instead in its relationship to the being of the Other. The latter is represented by the function of the *tu*, which depends on the bond created by the speaker through his speech act.

Consequently, we can assert that the phantasy and the joke are two antagonistic ways, two different psychic resources, of sheltering oneself from the yoke of critical reason. The pre-analytic phantasy (phantasy-imagination) is a reserve cut off from any social bond with the other, and ultimately also with the Other (the disjunction between *jouissance* and desire performed by the analytic act is, in a way, unborn in the dimension of phantasy). The joke, on the contrary, from its own constitution is an act that depends on the bond established with some other (who at a certain moment must take the place of the Other).

The joke formation is, therefore, the one that best reveals, outside of analytic praxis, the unconscious in its dimension of discourse, the fact that the unconscious, in its appropriate psychoanalytic sense, does not exist without a particular bond with the other. In short, it shows that there is no performative act independent of the Other.

Outside of analytic praxis, the joke differs from other formations of the unconscious (such as the *lapsus*) by the fact of creating a peculiar relationship between sense and nonsense. Cassin shows how, even though Freud's approach to the joke seems to imply a similar importance of sense and nonsense in considering the phenomenon, what ultimately prevails in his theory is the register of sense. Without going into the detailed discussion that this point would require, if we take into consideration the Lacanian notion of ab-sense taken up by Barbara Cassin, it is possible to go beyond the alternative between these two terms. As she shows, ab-sense cannot be strictly assimilated neither to sense nor to nonsense, it is rather "a hole in the

pair” (*Jacques* 180). Therefore, the performative act of the joke can be related to the hole of ab-sense that institutes an unstable boundary between sense and nonsense.

### Beyond the Performativity of the Speech Act

As we have seen, the performative dimension of the act in psychoanalysis requires starting from the following consideration: being does not serve as a model to account for what is created through the word. The efficacy of the word in its dimension of act does not lie in creating things or entities through the utterance or enunciation. Below we will show that here lies one of the fundamental differences with the performative act as conceived by Austin, clearly specified in the very title of his well-known work: *How to Do Things with Words*.

The developments of this author show the consistency of being that the word acquires in the performative act. On the one hand, a personalized version of the act arises, strictly linked to the place granted to the first person as the agent of what he does, that is, to the activity carried out by the self that utters the statement; as Austin points it out, “actions can only be performed by persons, and obviously in our cases the utterer must be the performer” (60). The first person together with the active voice and the present of the indicative are fundamental for these developments: “At least, if issuing the utterance is doing something, the ‘I’ and the ‘active’ and the ‘present’ seem appropriate” (69). With regard to the present, it is important to note the contemporaneity of the uttered statement and the act performed.

On the other hand, there is some kind of ideology of transparency, related to the search for a univocal sense, in Austin’s formulation. This shows to what extent this performative is linked to the Aristotelian principle of non-contradiction. In Austin’s conception the speaker should be as precise as possible, to avoid any possibility of misinterpretation: “to do or to say these things is to make plain how the action is to be taken or understood, what action it is” (70). That is why the “‘most successful’ of numerous speech-devices” is that of the “explicit performative formula”. The purpose of explicitness is to indicate the sense in which the utterance “is to be taken” (73). This makes it clear how the performative act is situated on the horizon of understanding: ambiguity and contradiction must be avoided. Obviously, this implies a very different status for the act, opposed to that related to the action of the signifier in the psychic structure as psychoanalysis understands it.

The two aspects of Austin’s performative that have just been pointed out (its close relationship with the first person, the present indicative and the active voice; and its foundation in the principle of non-contradiction) serve as a fundamental framework to situate, against this version of the act, the specificities of the psychoanalytic performative.

In the first place, it must be said that in psychoanalysis the act model requires going beyond the idea that makes the person of the speaker an agent of his discourse. The

fact that this model is in large part based on the present tense of the first-person indicative, indicates that the distinction between these two different forms of performative (Austin's speech act and psychoanalytic praxis from a Lacanian point of view) can also be approached in relation to the different status of enunciation in psychoanalysis and in linguistics (specifically considering the works of Émile Benveniste).

We will not address here the details about the specific performative transformations that occur in psychoanalytic praxis and its links with the unconscious enunciation; instead, we will dwell on its conditions of possibility, to show how transference and interpretation have a performative dimension that establishes the act in the analytic device.

### **The Performativity of the Psychoanalytic Device: Interpretation and Transference**

From some developments of the seminar *The Psychoanalytic Act* we can deduce what makes performative the praxis of psychoanalysis from the very operation of the transference and interpretation. We should start from this idea: in psychoanalysis the act is not personalistic, it is not a doing, an action carried out either by the analyst or by the patient. The act is both the cause and the effect of the transferential bond which gives rise to the analytic discourse.

With the pair "psychoanalytic act" and "psychoanalyzing task" that Lacan introduces (*Seminar XV* 103), we can circumscribe the transferential bond in relation to the status of interpretation. It must not be believed that these two categories (task and act) can be assigned to each of the two participants of the analytic scene. No one is the owner of the analytic act, this latter does not belong, strictly speaking, to anyone. Likewise, the task implies a work, and it is obviously the patient who does it, but in total dependence on the bond with the transferential Other of which the analyst is the support. This can be put in the following way: it is the transferential bond which gives a performative status to the word related to the act, whose fundamental effect is the institution of a psychoanalyzing task.

To elucidate this, let's see how Lacan accounts for the operation of transference and interpretation in the seminar *The Psychoanalytic Act*:

And that what is advanced in this connection as being the register where analytic interpretation is played out in its originality, namely, precisely what ensures that in no way is it possible in a kind of anteriority for there to have been known, what is revealed by the interpretative intervention. Namely, what makes of transference something quite different to the object already there, in a way inscribed in everything that it is going to produce. A pure and simple repetition of something which already, from previously,

would only be waiting to express itself there, instead of being produced by its retroactive effect (*Seminar XV* 113).

The temporality of the analytic act it is what makes it possible to clarify both the transference and interpretation operations, showing to what extent they are linked to each other in the device. Interpretation is constitutive of what it produces with respect to knowledge (*savoir*), and, at this point, it could be characterized as performative. Its purpose is not to bring to light a pre-existing being, something that would be found operating in advance in the shadows, as if it were just a libidinal reservoir waiting to be revealed. The transference, for its part, does not operate in the sense of a replication, where the issue would be to update for the current situation (*hic et nunc* with the analyst) what existed in the past.

If every phantasy as such is uninterpretable, as Lacan stated in the previous seminar *The Logic of Phantasy*, it is because what is interpreted is something else. If the phantasy is non-existent for the interpretation, it is because the latter does not operate on referents (neither imaginary nor real). As a result of this, the phantasy, indirectly approached from the unconscious discourse, takes the place of a remainder of the analytic work carried out. To give to the phantasy the “place of an axiom” (*Seminar XIV* 189) it is necessary to conceive it with this retroactive sense: it is at the beginning of the structure of the subject, but only after analytic work has been done.

The interpretation does not establish facts, nor does it give consistency to beings. Its temporality is related to *kairos*, which “is autotelic, it contains within it its own end”. As the *kairos* can be circumscribed as “the act that has its own end in itself, a kind of divine interiorization of finality” (*Jacques* 87), it makes clear that interpretation is not teleological, that it does not tend to any particular end, seeking to unveil the hidden secret of a past (read in a finalist way). Interpretation finds its own end in itself, emerging from the very desire, as we will see below.

The interpretation is not directed at any referent, it introduces something of another order, which implies working in the unstable boundary between sense and nonsense. The referent is created by the discourse, but this occurs in the dimension of the *ab-sense*, which operates as a non-positive referent, that is, as a hole in both sense and nonsense. This is why interpretation consummates the passage from the pre-analytic dimension of fiction to the order of *fixion*.

Interpretation is constitutive of what it reveals. This implies that the interpretation is beyond any possibility of predictability, the analyst is not a soothsayer, just as the Sophist isn't either (in the first of the two senses examined by Cassin and mentioned above). The analyst is not the doer of the interpretation, which is not his property. In contrast to this, Lacanian teaching allows us to see that interpretation comes with the analysand's desire, but that it is not immanent to it. The interpretive fold that desire brings with it only acquires the dimension of an act if it gets connected, through praxis, with the Other's discourse (whose axis is the transferential bond

with the analyst). This makes it possible to see to what extent interpretation and transference are inseparable.

Interpretation weaves a bond that is based on psychoanalytic transference, which implies the absence of an ultimate referent. This can be specified as follows: the analyst as an object is pierced by the analysand's unconscious Other, which is, in fact, the ultimate source of the effectiveness of the analytic transference. The transferential bond implies that whoever interprets is not, ultimately, the analyst but the subject of the unconscious that the psychoanalytic praxis makes emerge. Transference is the act by which otherness is injected into a desire that already operates by interpretation, as can be deduced from Lacan's developments in his sixth seminar (*Seminar VI*). The fold between desire and interpretation will be retroactively transformed by the performance of the psychoanalytic act.

In his first seminar Lacan stated the following: "The *Verdrängung* is always a *Nachdrängung*. How then should one explain the return of the repressed? As paradoxical as it may seem, there is only one way to do it - it doesn't come from the past, but from the future" (*Seminar I* 158). In a way, this assertion can be conceived as a surprising anticipation of the importance of the performative act for the constitution of the unconscious discourse. Therefore, we must read it taking into account this consideration, deduced by Cassin from her reading of Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen*: "Discourse extracts the power of time as it is never present". In psychoanalysis, "liberating the present" (*Efecto* 78) from the weight of the current time implies a peculiar type of performative. As we have shown, it is based on its two fundamental pillars, interpretation and transference, which are not related to any referent, neither in the present nor in the past. This gives rise to the desiring existence in a projection towards the future. At this point, the discourse implemented in an analysis can be considered to have the full dimension of the *logos-pharmakon* – a sort of *pharmakon* that "constitutes a social link" (*Jacques* 56) – in terms similar to those specified by Cassin: "it frees from the present to give existence, in its place, to the object of desire" (*Efecto* 78).

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