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JOURNAL OF THE CIRCLE FOR LACANIAN IDEOLOGY CRITIQUE

VOL 13

On Barbara Cassin

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BARBARA CASSIN AND OLIVER FELTHAM

INTERVIEW

Barbara Cassin's domicile, Paris, 21st June 2022

Oliver Feltham: The first time I came across your work was when somebody sent me a translation that I now think came from your *Vocabulaire* – it was the article on rhetoric. I had thought the original came from *L'effet sophistique* but I looked through it afterwards and it wasn't exactly the same thing. You were working on the weave of discourse and threads – it was for the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, and a Canadian was organising the whole thing.

Barbara Cassin: No no, I wrote it specially for him.

Oliver Feltham: Oh. Okay. Well apparently you weren't so happy with the quality of the first draft of the translation done by somebody else, and so someone sent it to me and I had to fix it. When I was doing that translation – because I hadn't come across your work yet – I thought it was quite astonishing; it was a type of writing that made me think the author had been inspired by Derrida but had done something quite original – because most people inspired by Derrida in the English-speaking world make a kind of imitation. Every now and then you mention Derrida in your oeuvre, not very often, but I wonder whether there isn't a connection, an influence, a link between your work and Derrida's oeuvre, something particular that stays with you.

Barbara Cassin: Well that's slightly odd because, how can I put it, Derrida's great works, all his great books, I know them and I knew Derrida quite well, but I didn't feel like getting caught up in all that. I had already been caught in Heidegger's net, so falling back into the same kind of thing wasn't worth it – even if, obviously, it was different to Heidegger, but all the same, that line of thinking relates more to Heidegger than to Deleuze or Lyotard. I didn't know Deleuze very well – though his work was very important to me – yet I knew Lyotard very well and Derrida quite well. Actually, one could say that I use Derrida the most now, with the benefit of distance, and especially, fundamentally, his *Monolingualism of the Other*, which is fantastic, and which really inspired me from the outset. There's a way in which I'm able to work *a parte post*. In a similar manner I knew Lacan well, had known

him for a long time – he asked me to give him a course on doxography, so we knew each other – but there again I didn't really feel like getting caught up. But I was able to write *Jacques le sophiste* simply because Lacan was more different to me than Derrida. For Derrida there would be no point in doing that; besides, he's not a sophist, not at all.

Oliver Feltham: Despite what some say about him.

Barbara Cassin: Not even a little bit. Despite what he says about himself in the *Monolingualism of the other*, well, what he says others say about him.

Oliver Feltham: I remember one of his essays which really struck us during my undergraduate education in Australia – “Signature, Event, Context” on...

Barbara Cassin: On Austin.

Oliver Feltham: Yes, and especially the polemic with Searle.

Barbara Cassin: That's a pain in the arse. I read it of course, and there are things from Derrida that I've kept from “Signature, Event, Context”, but that fight bored me to tears.

Oliver Feltham: Just the other day I was reading your essay on Lacan's “L'étourdit” along with Badiou's. There's a connection between the existence of ambivalences [*equivokes*], in our discourse and the appearance of the point of enunciation, the moment of the subject as soon as s/he states something. I don't quite understand it yet: what is the direct link between...

Barbara Cassin: The link is the signifier. In other words, when you speak, and you hear, and you pronounce, there are some signifiers circulating, and there can be ambivalences solely at the level of the signifier, otherwise it's a question of homonymy. Hang on, that's not quite right. The perception of ambivalences in psychoanalysis is obviously linked to the signifier.

Oliver Feltham: But does one need the cut of the analyst's interpretation to...

Barbara Cassin: No.

Oliver Feltham: ...mark the signifier as signifier, no?

Barbara Cassin: No... You can be your own audience, your own wall. You can do it like Lacan; that is, play on the signifier, put the signifier to work. Anyway, this is always what you do when you write.

Oliver Feltham: Yes I've seen that. I wrote two books on Oliver Cromwell and it took a friend to point that one out to me. I have another question...There's a kind of conceptual object which...Your work on equivocal signifiers fascinates me. I have worked a lot on Locke on political conflicts and the link to equivocal actions. That is, there is an action and people cannot find the right word for the action. There is a conflict in a community over what has just happened. For example, the American air-force talks about ‘collateral damage’ whilst in Pakistan people say “No, that was

a civilian massacre! Even if you say it was a mistake, it's still a civilian massacre". I wonder whether there is a link between this object which is already in Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding* and your work on the question of ambivalences and the production of a new consensus in the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa.

Barbara Cassin: Tell me again what you think about Locke so that I have it in mind.

Oliver Feltham: Locke says, first of all, that the difference between our knowledge of substances and our knowledge of actions is that there is no archetype for actions, because we or our culture invented the words. This is what he calls a 'mixed mode', that is a set of different properties. For example, parricide is a mix of 'murder', 'father', 'voluntary act', 'not in the context of a war', etc. There are names for each culture, and they have to be passed down to the next generation, but there is no substance, no model for them in reality. So first he says there is no problem with truth because we all agree, we made up these names, it's pure convention, so it's a kind of nominalism. Then he recognizes that there is a problem with truth – because it's the epoch of the great religious wars – in that there is no agreement on the names of certain actions, especially in the case of a conflict. Something has been done and the two sides cannot manage to come to agreement...

Barbara Cassin: Even on the thing, the name to give to the thing, so on the thing.

Oliver Feltham: Yes.

Barbara Cassin: Well of course with Desmond Tutu. I have citations where people say exactly that: the difference of names was what disturbed the appellants, and drove them to a point at which they no longer knew what to do because there was no longer any common or stable language. This is the signature of *stasis*, of civil war, since Thucydides: changing the meaning of words, designating as 'terrorists' both those who are guilty of terrorist acts and those who struggled using legal and pacifist means. Of course, I agree entirely. But those are, how can I put it, voluntary ambivalences. There is a name from one point of view but all the same the other knows that something is named in this manner for the other. That is what is disturbing, that's what drives people mad: that something can be called 'murder' or 'extreme prejudice', or 'legitimate defence'.

Oliver Feltham: Well for Locke it's certainly bound up with his diagnosis of faction, with the work of *stasis*.

Barbara Cassin: Yes. In South Africa, what was indicated under the term 'defence' was a murder! The appellants knew this and it drove them crazy. They no longer trusted anything, not even language.

Oliver Feltham: So there is a kind of semantic disturbance.

Barbara Cassin: A profound disturbance. For Lacan a joke is nonsense within sense, but here it is more than that. It's – well how can I put this – it's the inscribing of a standpoint within language. That is very disturbing when we supposedly

share a common language, and then one realizes to what point the inscription of a standpoint produces language. That's a real question. As soon as this kind of thing occurs you are obliged to be political, that is, it is up to you to be the measure of language. It's your job to say "this means that", so at that point you are committed.

Oliver Feltham: It's also a question of power, or of the capacity to impose or transmit one's own interpretation of words.

Barbara Cassin: But that's precisely the point: it's not an interpretation, it's a fact. That's the problem: it takes place at the level of facts. One cannot say that it's prejudice or harm, it's murder. It's your job to inscribe the fact in language: you are responsible at that point. The measure is you. You are the measure of language in that situation. And so you have to say "Excuse me, but this is not a prejudice", or "Excuse me but you did not fondle her, you raped her".

Oliver Feltham: Straightaway that leads us to a particular understanding of the role not just of intellectuals but of people in the public sphere, in public encounters.

Barbara Cassin: Yes. Public and private. Everywhere.

Oliver Feltham: The other question that struck me about your oeuvre...When I began to write an article on your work it was on something that is not central to it: theatre. I did this because I found so many references, so many metaphors. For instance, when speaking of the sophists you often say "between liturgy and happenings" and I have also found a fair few 'primitive scenes' in your oeuvre.

Barbara Cassin: Oh yes? Do tell.

Oliver Feltham: Well there's the 'decision of sense', then there's the scene between Gorgias and Parmenides in the *Treatise of Non-being*.

Barbara Cassin: Yes.

Oliver Feltham: It seems to me that you also have a theatrical way of setting up the context, the situation of your oeuvre, especially of *L'effet sophistique*, in that there is a grand combat, it seems, a grand combat between logology and ontology, between a consistent relativism and universalism, between the principle that there is no sexual relation, and the principle of contradiction. So I have several questions here: we can say that you have allies in this struggle, this combat, because there's Nietzsche, there's Lyotard, there's Novalis, Lacan, Tutu, and all the sophists of course, and then there are others, who are not really enemies, but they are certainly identified as targets, like Apel and Habermas. If one were to continue this combat, what would follow, what kinds of consequences, for example, for teaching philosophy?

Barbara Cassin: I believe that if things were to change, it would begin with translation. So if I were a professor of philosophy now I wouldn't put up with readings not also being given in their original language. That's how I would work, how I would begin, because that is a consistent relativism (*relativisme conséquent*).

I think it would do some good to measure the other in that manner. I would start there, now, and I would do the same thing with literature too. But maybe not because if you're a professor of French literature you're a professor of *French* literature. But I wouldn't put up with my children, and my grandchildren, reading 'Bilbo le hobbit' without knowing that it's not French. That drives me up the wall.

Oliver Feltham: I see. The other question tied to that, to that attention to translation, well, there was a phrase that struck me at the end of *L'effet sophistique*, that kind of imperative or call to arms which is the "breaking down of barriers between genres".

Barbara Cassin: Of the *logos*, yes.

Oliver Feltham: I saw...well, first of all its quite evident in your oeuvre because there are essays...What about if we look at the French situation now, there are a few authors who work in different...

Barbara Cassin: In different domains.

Oliver Feltham: Yes, in different domains. Badiou is an example but he's a little exceptional. You have really worked between the two, between philosophy and fiction.

Barbara Cassin: Here's the thing though: for Badiou each genre is pure. For me genres are porous. That's the big difference. When Badiou writes theatre, he writes theatre. So, it can be very bad theatre. When he writes philosophy, he really writes philosophy, when he writes poetry, he really writes poetry, and they can be bad poems. Writing for me is only ever one thing, to speak is only ever one thing. So I always thought I wasn't a real philosopher in the way in which philosophers are real philosophers; that is, writing philosophy alone. When I write philosophy within philosophy, I also write because the poetry of language resonates. I write philosophy differently than I would if I were solely a philosopher. Besides, it's a problem because I also paint. If I was really a painter...

Oliver Feltham: Really?

Barbara Cassin: There are heaps of paintings by me in this room (*indicates them*). If I were really a painter I would put up with painting badly so as to paint better. If I were really a painter, I would not stop with a painting as soon as it pleased me. I would continue because I would need to learn and continue and go further and make things. You see, I only allow myself to think like that in philosophy. Perhaps that's how I'm a philosopher. It's the only thing that's different with literature. With literature as soon as I start to like it, I stop. Painting, I stop when something starts to take shape: don't touch because you'll make it worse.

Oliver Feltham: But isn't it also because there's a history, because you have, like everybody within the philosophical institution in France, a history

Barbara Cassin: We have to give an account of ourselves, that's for sure...

Oliver Feltham: There are accounts to be given, and authorities...

Barbara Cassin: Of course, that's all true, but let's say I was appointed as a philosopher and I found this profession fantastic because in this profession you could ask completely bizarre questions; you could be paid to ask whether God exists. I love this. But that didn't stop me from having the impression when I was a philosophy teacher – I wasn't a philosophy teacher for long in highschool, because the teaching conditions were unbearable. I had two children, I had been appointed a long way away, a two-hour train ride, well, it was impossible, just impossible. So I did philosophy at *Ecole Postes and Communications* (a school) or in a day clinic. The first year after my work experience I really taught philosophy but not for an entire year because I was sent on early maternity leave. I was pregnant and what with going from one classroom to another one I ended up climbing twenty floors a day, which didn't bother me at all but the workplace doctor did not approve. So I spent eight months of happiness teaching philosophy to philosophy classes with no idea what I was doing, that is, writing things on the blackboard, doing Ancient Greek with them, letting myself focus on what I thought was important. The result of all that, after all, was that my first year of teaching was in a very difficult highschool at Porte de Vanves – I think I tell this story in a book somewhere – and the headmaster called me to his office. I was scared of course and he told me "I have two things to say to you. First you must not smoke in class. Second the Maths teacher's son told his father that he has never been so happy in class."

Oliver Feltham: How great was that?

Barbara Cassin: There you go.

Oliver Feltham: This whole thing of giving an account of yourself...What's odd is that there has been this boomerang of 'French theory' through the English-speaking world, precisely because of a lot of translations Lyotard and Baudrillard and Foucault at the end of the 1970s in Australia.

Barbara Cassin: Are you Australian?

Oliver Feltham: Yes. English-Australian but I spent twenty years in Australia. So there was this boom of creativity in the all the humanities disciplines and there were attempts at 'ficto-criticism'. In the 1990s the imperative was to disturb the boundaries of genres, and I came to Paris in 1995, as if to Mecca, to go to Derrida and then Badiou's course. I was shocked to find out just how marginal Derrida and especially Badiou were in relation to the philosophical institution here, and just how conservative it was at the level of what could be said and written.

Barbara Cassin: Terribly conservative, and all the more so at the CNRS (National centre of scientific research) because one had to prove that one was a scholar, which was extra-complicated. At least when you are teaching you can, how can I put this, seduce – you have the right – but when you are a scholar you have to prove that you are doing research that no-one else has done previously. So you publish a text that no one has ever published or understood.

Oliver Feltham: So you have to make your mark, you have to leave...

Barbara Cassin: Yes, And then the *agregation* (the exam to be appointed as a highschool teacher) is an odd thing.

Oliver Feltham: Yes I am participating in the jury of a graduate school tomorrow as an ‘international expert’ and I still don’t quite understand the admission criteria. Often the *agregation* counts for something.

Barbara Cassin: It shouldn’t. That’s obvious. I’m not an ‘*agregé*’ you know (*someone who passed the agregation exam*). When I entered into the CNRS people said ‘Be quiet! Don’t let anyone know!’

Oliver Feltham: I also wanted to know with ‘consistent relativism’, didn’t it interest you...didn’t you find anchors in other relativists in the history of philosophy apart from Lyotard? You mention Quine for example.

Barbara Cassin: Sure, why not? But for me it’s really on the basis of Protagoras that it gets interesting. It’s that definition that immediately leads to politics. I could have done some great work with Françoise Balibar on the relative, relation, relativity, relativism: we began but then stopped. One can work with scholars. But all that involves different kinds of tension. In actual fact, I haven’t looked for other anchors.

Oliver Feltham: Because you already have them in your own material.

Barbara Cassin: Because in the end an anchoring in Ancient Greek, and Ancient Greek philosophy, is what matters to me. It seems to me that I have an expertise there which I can put to work which is far more substantial than in the rest.

Oliver Feltham: It seems to me that you liberated yourself from Heidegger’s weight quite early on.

Barbara Cassin: Yes (*emphatic*).

Oliver Feltham: Because you have your own Greeks.

Barbara Cassin: Yes. I’m in the middle of putting together a collection of articles for the ‘Bouquins’ series, and I regret not having included my first article which was “Can one be presocratic in a different manner?”. Different to Heidegger...

Oliver Feltham: There’s another important connection that I’ve noticed here and there in your work and it’s René Char and Francis Ponge. Both of them are there. What I haven’t managed to understand is Ponge’s position in your thinking – does he bring something, is he a reference in a...

Barbara Cassin: I use what I find. Take Ponge’s poem on homonymy as the “optimum of writing”, each word used in each of its meanings, to please a whole range of people from metaphysicians to cooks – well, it’s so fantastic I use it. That’s all. But it doesn’t mean anything. Besides I really enjoy reading Ponge but I use little things, little snippets which match up with my own little snippets. Char was completely different. Char was true love, that’s very different.

Oliver Feltham: In Ponge there's this project to find a way of describing, to try to find in language the means of expression. In *Le rage de l'expression* there was that entire pine forest: what struck me was the way he repeated the same descriptions so as to grasp, to try to communicate, to identify, I don't know, the texture of that pine forest. He had the project of grasping the essence of things in language whereas you with your attention to the signifier and the way you have of undoing the decision of meaning: those two things don't go together so well.

Barbara Cassin: To grasp the essence of things – but if one grasped it another way? If one grasped it with words, it is already another way of doing it. It is a completely un-Platonic way of going about things: to grasp the essence of things with words is already sophistic. So after you bar essence, it bars itself. The first scene...

Barbara Cassin searches in a folder, finds an envelope and draws out of it the first book that she composed and printed. It is in a small format and consists of around 24 pages. Its first pages consist of a palimpsest of texts printed over each other at different angles.

Barbara Cassin: This is the first book I made in my whole life.

Oliver Feltham: Right.

Barbara Cassin: Come and look at how it's put together. I did the typesetting and printed it. It begins like that, with the blotting papers which are used to wipe the ink, and then slowly the text emerges, becomes readable. There is the text like this and the footnotes are also texts which are sometimes in the body-text, inside it, and sometimes added, transcribed in two ways: like a poem, or like prose. I made this first book when I was, maybe, twenty-five, and I sent it to two people: Derrida and Lacan. Lacan wrote back straight away saying "I like the first pages" (the unreadable blotting papers) (*laughs*) and Derrida responded a year later "Dear Mademoiselle, blah blah blah..." It's funny no?

Oliver Feltham: And that was before you identified a direction for yourself, or was it just...

Barbara Cassin: At the time I was doing a review of poetry murals.

Oliver Feltham: Were you inspired by art, by something in the world of contemporary art at the time?

Barbara Cassin: It was just after May '68! I did it with two friends, one of whom became a professor of art history, who ended up there, because we were twenty at the time. The other taught visual arts at Vincennes.

Oliver Feltham: When Vincennes (Université Paris 8) was still actually at Vincennes?

Barbara Cassin: Yes.

Oliver Feltham: I have another question but it's a bit broad. It's again based on this grand combat that I read into your work. In the beginning, especially in *L'effet*

sophistique, logology reminded me of grammatology because it's a grand project launched with great momentum, and there was also the rewriting of the history of philosophy on the basis of sophistics. Once one has understood ontology as having been constructed out of a play on syntax, what exactly emerges as the project of rewriting the history of philosophy? Because, in the contemporary philosophical landscape, there are other projects, like Deleuze's, of doing a minor history of philosophy, there's Badiou who makes his choices, with this entire apparatus of the four conditions of philosophy, such that either it's antiphilosophy, or philosophy doesn't exist very often; Heidegger's project with ontotheology, Derrida with the metaphysics of presence. Each time it's different: the relation between the one and the other is different which entails all kinds of things at the level of strategy and tactics. I wonder whether there isn't a form, a way of outlining, ahead of time, what might be made out of such a rewriting of the history of philosophy.

Barbara Cassin: One thing is certain: it'll shift the perception of the excluded. We will understand differently why they are excluded. So it draws the borders of philosophy. It draws borders in relation to the most serious material I had found: the relation between sense, nonsense, ab-sense, the principle of identity, the principle of contradiction, the principle of reason... How can we speak differently? I don't know how to speak differently. It's very interesting to look at how we might speak differently, and whether, in speaking differently, we'd still be within what could be called 'philosophy' – love of knowledge, or whatever – but involved in a tradition that allows itself to be rethought, by dispossessing it of its universality. That's always what's at stake. Who believes themselves universal and why?

Oliver Feltham: Obviously you've travelled a lot for work. In other countries with other traditions have you seen the borders of philosophy differently?

Barbara Cassin: First of all I saw, for example, analytic philosophy at work in certain universities in Brazil and Germany. I understood there that nothing could get through, one could not get anything through: it was dense. The other did not have its place, that's for sure. I saw this kind of thing take place because it's all political, of course, academic politics and strategic. So when I was the president of the CNRS committee responsible for philosophy, I started out by finding it quite unfair that there was no place for analytic philosophy. So I made a place for them, I opened things up: by which means, they ended up firing everyone. Well, that's how I saw it in the end. No-one new could enter unless she or he was one of them. That was unbearable. Now perhaps that's also what occurs in phenomenology – it's not impossible – except I'm 'borderline' in phenomenology and so no-one dared fire me, but in analytic philosophy I'm not borderline. I'm not speaking only of myself, I say 'I' but...

Oliver Feltham: But in Germany isn't the situation a bit different?

Barbara Cassin: Those that I saw in relation to the *Dictionary of Untranslatables* found it insufferable.

Oliver Feltham: Really?

Barbara Cassin: Yes. Not everyone but basically those who had a little power, yes. Because in a certain manner the place was already occupied by Gadamer so it wasn't worth adding another.

Oliver Feltham: So there's one place alone for someone who works on discourse, the nature of words, language, and then there's not enough room...

Barbara Cassin: There you go, that's it!

Oliver Feltham: Only one can be tolerated.

Barbara Cassin: How can I put it? That's my external perception.

Oliver Feltham: The question you work on, and which appears in the epistolary text with Badiou – and you also cite Catherine Malabou on this – this question of being a woman and being a philosopher in relation to the universal. At one point you say...I read...there's a text which isn't a letter at the end of the book. I jumped over the contents page, so I was a bit confused at one moment.

Barbara Cassin: I don't remember any more.

Oliver Feltham: It becomes a little more programmatic as if you got a bit cross with each other towards the end (*laughs*).

Barbara Cassin: Oh, I didn't notice that.

Oliver Feltham: Yes, after eight letters each, you say "Enough. Now we're going to cross the t's and put the dots on the i's, and we're going to set out the problem with your universal Alain." It's much more programmatic, a little less playful.

Barbara Cassin: I have no memory at all of what I said there.

Oliver Feltham: There are a series of points you make. You say there aren't really any women in the history of philosophy. They can be counted on the fingers of one hand: Hypatia and Hannah Arendt. I thought...you see we've found ourselves in the same situation now. I work at an American university. After Black Lives Matter we started working a lot on the question of diversity and inclusion (which, by the way, is only one way of working on Black Lives Matter, but anyway). We had some students who said "Look this is all fine but we can't find ourselves in your curriculum, there are only Europeans". Once one starts to expand the curriculum it's clear that one can start studying other authors from other countries and other continents, except one has to let go of what's called 'philosophy' as a signifier. The stakes become very complicated at that point: there's a thin line between being colonial a second time over by saying we're going to recuperate the other's discourse and say 'that is philosophy, but in their manner' and so one's engaging in a kind of operation of capture to nourish European philosophy, which is a kind of imperial vampire and.... Or one multiplies the names of discourses that interest us. It's a completely open project. Nobody knows the right directions.

Barbara Cassin: The person with whom I work on more or less those questions is Souleymane Bachir Daigne. He has two models of the universal: the overview universal, as Levinas has it, and the lateral universal, from Merleau-Ponty. For him this second universal is that of translation. In the end perhaps it's not so much a question of multiplying names as one of lateralising positions, allowing positions to be drawn from the outside and more in a blurred way. For me the norm is the blurred. As soon as you make hard distinctions, that scares me. Yet when Badiou says "No! No, that is not philosophy!" it kind of calms me down. That's how I'd put it.

Oliver Feltham: I thought that if there weren't many women in the history of philosophy, there are, after all, many women who have written but under other names, other discourses: mysticism for example.

Barbara Cassin: Yes but that's precisely the problem: someone says "that is not philosophy". It is normal for a woman and not difficult, I mean there's no fight to be had – to write a novel or be a mystic. There is no fight, it's okay. No more than for making a chicken casserole! It's okay. You are clearly fulfilling your role, and you can go one better by also giving birth. Yet when you say 'I am a philosopher', then things get serious, and complicated, because at that moment you become more masculine than men. You do philosophy that is even more in conformity to the rules. In a certain manner, if you look at which women-philosophers entered into the College of France, it's even worse than the men-philosophers. All of that is quite simple.

Oliver Feltham: I think that Badiou says himself in his autobiography somewhere that at the time at Rue d'Ulm (Ecole Normale Supérieure) people boasted about having a system, a theory, so as to seduce women. The theory was the phallus.

Barbara Cassin: Absolutely, yes.

Oliver Feltham: It's not the car it's the theory?!

Barbara Cassin: That's how it works. But already the Sartre-Beauvoir couple changed things a little, because he had the theory but after all, what did she have? The theory plus her lovers. So it's okay (*laughs*), in a certain manner. She also had her theory.

Oliver Feltham: Right, and moreover there's an entire inheritance, a lineage of de Beauvoir which is easily as strong as Sartre's, especially overseas.

Barbara Cassin: Absolutely.

Oliver Feltham: Everyone knows *Le seconde sexe* [*The Second Sex*].

Barbara Cassin: That's right. Deuxième.

Oliver Feltham: Oh. Yes. Sorry. *Le deuxième sexe*.¹

Barbara Cassin: No you're right! It should be called "The Second Sex"...unless there are more than two sexes. That's the interesting thing. No-one ever understood why she called it 'le deuxième sexe' and not 'le second sexe'.²

Oliver Feltham: This phrase that you wrote about breaking down the barriers of genre – Penelope Deutscher immediately understood it as breaking down gender barriers. She played on the two meanings.³

Barbara Cassin: Quite. But we agreed on that point.

Oliver Feltham: People have tried to pay more attention to questions of gender for quite a while now, not necessarily in the world of philosophy, but in the world of critical theory in the English-speaking world.

Barbara Cassin: Not in France at least, but it is getting there! Just as Derrida was imported into the Anglo-Saxon world, here critical theory, comparative literature, feminism and Black Lives Matter are being imported, even if they already existed, but they are making a big comeback as imports.

Oliver Feltham: It's so strange, for example, with Luce Irigaray who was huge for us but she is not really present in the French scene.

Barbara Cassin: Because she is very unfashionable. I knew her quite well. When something is fashionable it becomes unfashionable. It so happens that in France she was quite fashionable.

Oliver Feltham: I suppose that was tied to a reading of Lacan.

Barbara Cassin: Yes.

Oliver Feltham: I was talking to Jacques Lezra about that dialogue with Badiou because obviously you are allies, you edit a book series together, you are far more open than normal editors in French publishing houses. How did you meet?

Barbara Cassin: We met after I wrote *The Decision of Meaning*. At that time Seuil [the publishing house] published a type of collection about the noteworthy books of the year. I had just published *The Decision of Meaning* on book Gamma of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, and we had asked Stanislas Breton to review it. Badiou was at the book launch for that 'annual philosophy directory', and we met, and he told me he thought my book was important, and then we worked together. Because that was the moment when Ricoeur left, François Wahl also, and Badiou was looking for someone to take on his series with him "L'ordre philosophique", and he wanted it to be a woman.

Oliver Feltham: Was this a long time at Seuil before it all fell apart, the scandal?

Barbara Cassin: Yes. We left Seuil when they refused François Wahl's book. That's how it happened, it was that simple. Alain Badiou intimidated me, and at the same

time I found it highly amusing. He was always incredibly generous. We've got on very well ever since, whatever our differences might be.

Oliver Feltham: Seen from abroad your points of agreement are much stronger.

Barbara Cassin: It's possible.

Oliver Feltham: The work on Lacan will be especially important.

Barbara Cassin: Seen by his French political friends, they gave him a bollicking for working with me!

Oliver Feltham: Aren't you Maoist enough?

Barbara Cassin: (*laughs*) No!

Oliver Feltham: But wouldn't that reduce slightly the field of possible allies, if one had to be the right kind of Maoist?

Barbara Cassin: That's it...But, English Lacan, it's incomprehensible!

Oliver Feltham: Yes! I had a project with a friend to translate "L'etourdit", so we spent two or three days on it, but we ended up saying no, it's impossible.

Barbara Cassin: But it is possible, you should do a bilingual translation, the English text, and footnotes like this (*Barbara Cassin indicates very long notes*). That would be very interesting, even if you only ended up doing three pages, three pages like that...

Notes

1. The original title of de Beauvoir's book in French is *Le deuxième sexe*.
2. For ordinal numbering in French, 'seconde' is used when there are only two items, whereas 'deuxième' is used when there are more than two items.
3. *Genre* in French means both genre and gender.

JACQUES LEZRA AND OLIVER FELTHAM

INTERVIEW

American University of Paris, 17th May 2022

Oliver Feltham: How did you first come across Barbara Cassin's work?
Jacques Lezra: As far as I know it was when Emily Apter approached me about doing the work on the edition of the translation of the *Vocabulaire européenne des philosophies*. At that point I knew of Cassin I think by reputation but primarily as a friend of Emily's and as a philosopher of antiquity. There was this terrific collection of texts about animals in antiquity I knew of, but I hadn't read *L'effet sophistique* which became *Sophistical Practice* in English.¹ I knew of, but hadn't really investigated, her *Parmenides* edition which I later became acquainted with.

Oliver Feltham: When you first came across her work, when Emily Apter presented her work to you, how did she fit within the categories that were at work for you in your field? How was her work named? What kind of thinker was she presented as?

Jacques Lezra: Well, at the time I was working much less in political philosophy and more at the intersection of literary criticism, and I suppose you would call it epistemology. I was increasingly interested in ways in which practices of translation, and problems of translation of literary texts but also philosophical texts, disclose something about the original that was not patent in the original itself. So I had a kind of inchoate feeling that translation presented a really interesting direction to go in with regard to that point of intersection between literary criticism and epistemology. But it didn't have a name for me, and it didn't have a particular content. I had done a great deal of translating already by then, but I didn't have an awareness of myself as a translator, as someone who thought about translation very much until I began working with Cassin's work and seeing what the philosophical stakes could be. I took her at the time to be following out some of the questions regarding translation that you find in Derrida's work, but putting them to the test of a kind of institutional practice, putting them into the frame of institutions, putting

1. Cassin, B., Romeyer-Dherby G., & Labarriere, J-L., *L'animal dans l'antiquité* (Paris : Vrin, 1997).

the problem of translation into the context of a European project and then trying to think about what that translation of translation into the European context, into the context of the European funded project, might reflexively tell you about what translation is and can do in this moment or in the moment of 2004-2014. So there wasn't a specific name for this yet, and it certainly wasn't 'translation studies', which was and remains largely a field devoted to practical problems in translation, and not substantially or substantively to this philosophical problem posed by translation. The work of Lawrence Venuti was just beginning to make a splash in the United States and, although I found it not very useful, it was in conversation with Venuti, that Cassin's work came in the United States at that moment. It's also worth remarking that the United States academic world is deeply monoglot – in literature, where everything tends to be taught in English translation, and especially and very shockingly in philosophy, where the preponderance of analytic philosophy over continental, of philosophy devoted to solving a currently-defined problem rather than thinking about philosophical problems as intrinsically historical, thus multi-lingual, has meant that departments of philosophy largely set aside the matter of translation as secondary or even trivial.

Oliver Feltham: I think we're going to come back to this relationship between a certain kind of thinking of translation beyond the immediately practical difficulties of particular translations, and this larger question of institutional frameworks, of what might be a European project. This is a really interesting connection that you make in the introduction to your work *Untranslating Machines*. But specifically, there was something you just said then that caught my attention, which is this idea that in a translation, or in a contest between different translations of the same original text, something of the original text might be revealed. Can you go into that a little bit more?

Jacques Lezra: It's been my experience that very often what we fondly call the original text cannot make explicit – because of its originality, because it's written in, say, English – there are things about it that can't be made explicit simply because of their being expressed in English at a certain moment that can emerge when a translation occurs. So even terribly mistaken and erroneous translations quite often, to my mind, get something more right about the original than the original gets itself, because the original is constrained to a lexicon of enunciation, a moment of enunciation, and a set of protocols that by the same token are the conditions of intelligibility of the original but also constrain the original from opening up more interesting articulations and more problematical engagements with different possible worlds. Those engagements and articulations can emerge asynchronously through translations that get things wrong, that reveal something more interesting about the original than the original was able to reveal about itself. I wish I had an immediate example to offer. I tend to find them. It's not that I have a methodology to my work, but if I did, I would say that that's it; that is, to find, as I'm reading an original, to find something that strikes me as particularly peculiar in a formulation and... Oh I think I do actually have an example and perhaps we can get it from

the *Vocabulaire* itself. So this is from Alain Badiou's little entry on 'Français' in the *Vocabulaire*. He's distinguishing French from English, and he says, he characterizes English as...He makes a comment early in the entry about what he later calls "*la sensibilité empirique de la langue anglaise*" [the empirical sensibility of the English language] which can in turn become ineluctably a platitude if the translator is not a creator.² At the end of the entry Badiou writes, in the English translation:

We know of course (and this is a primary theme of this dictionary) that nothing peremptory can be said about languages that will not be disproven by some writer or poem or other. It is thus that rightly or wrongly we sometimes envy the power of German to lay out in an idolatrous semantics the depths offered by infinite exegesis. We also sometimes wish for the descriptive and ironic resources of English – this marvelous texture of the surface, the argumentation always circumscribed – which does not totalize anything since the grammar is never that of the here and now. And even the branching of Italian – when we stop thinking that it muddles everything at will and is running thirty different conversations at once, all erudite and mimetic, we admire its velocity and that when it affirms something, it keeps a clear eye on the other possible affirmation that a simple repentance over the sentence may bring to mind.

But this is not what Badiou says about English. Where the translation reads "We also sometimes wish for the descriptive and ironic resources of English – this marvelous texture of the surface, the argumentation always circumscribed – which does not totalize anything since the grammar is never that of the here and now" Badiou writes: "*Il nous arrive aussi de désirer la ressource descriptive et ironique de l'anglais, ce touché merveilleux de la surface, cette argumentation toujours circonscrite, qui ne totalise rien, parce que la grammaire n'est jamais que celle de l'ici et du maintenant.*" The translator makes a serious, if understandable, mistake – achieving a superb *contresens*. English doesn't totalize, Badiou means, just because its grammar is never *anything but* that of the here and now. The mistranslation precisely suppresses the grammatical operator "*que*," which the translator drops, having forgotten that the antecedent *ne* requires the subsequent *que*, and hence the negation of the affirmation. In other words, the *time* of translation is time in which to forget the sovereign force of the antecedent *ne*... this, just as the French is reminding its readers that English, the target language, is never *anything but* that of the here and now. The translator's mistake adds the factor of time, or reveals it, just where French's grammar hangs together, as if simultaneously, the antecedent *ne* and subsequent *que*. Here it's the *French* that works to circumscribe, and it's the (mistaken) English that adds the factor of time, ironically just as it asserts, wrongly to Badiou's French but correctly in mistranslation, that "the [English] grammar is never that of the here and now," since in this case it performs an act of forgetting what was not here-and-now in English, that is, the *ne-que* of the antecedent French. And this, I take it, discloses something about grammar *in French*, and perhaps

2. Cassin, B. et al., *Vocabulaire européenne des philosophies : dictionnaire des intraduisibles* (Paris : Editions du Seuil, 2004/2019), 468.

grammar *in general*, that Badiou's French cannot quite say *in French*, that is, that the time of expression in natural languages is *never* here-and-now, that is, never *formalizable*. Here what's at stake is not only an error in which a kind of nationalist bias or even a kind of ontologically nationalist bias makes itself felt – as when Badiou affirms that English is more “empirical” than French,” or Italian more fanciful – but the possibility of translating between natural and formal languages in general. And the limits of that possible translation are available, to Badiou's French, only when it's mistranslated into English.

Oliver Feltham: It struck me when reading the first couple of parts of *Marx's Things* and then also *Untranslating Machines*, that part of the way that you work is that you use contesting translations. There's the example you come back to quite frequently, which is Marx's claim that ‘production is *mittelbar* consumption’ and then it's translated as ‘simultaneously’ or it could have been translated by ‘immediately’. What this allows you to do, this unfortunate translation or mistranslation, is to show how the translations open up a semantic field which couldn't possibly be completely rendered explicit in the original text without an incredibly long discourse I suppose. And then you basically skip from the level of the translated text down to the, well, it is almost a kind of basement of the semantic field. You then move laterally between these kind of basements, these wide semantic fields that have been opened up.

Jacques Lezra: Yes, yes, that's a very good description of it. And I think that this will actually make sense in the context of a later question as well, the question about materialism, perhaps. What you are describing is the semantic basements amongst which I move contiguously, if you want. Let's say that I wanted to draw a distinction between my work, the way I understand the philosophy of translation, and Cassin's work. One thing that I would say is that for her the figure of the untranslatable and the characterization of untranslatability works as a kind of suturing point or *point de capitonnage*, such that the untranslatable or the claim of untranslatability attaches a natural language to a set of possible translations at a certain point. For Cassin, that's a certain point of constant work and constant repetition of work. But the perspective that she offers is a perspective of the untranslatable as a kind of suturing point: complex, always contested, *en tant que*, in as much as, it brings together a set of possibilities in the underground sense, and a current day usage of the term that is to be characterized as untranslatable.

My view is that leaving things there – which I believe is more or less where she left them philosophically, in the wake of the *Vocabulaire européen des Philosophies*, with an enormous elaboration of both the philological and philosophical attention to what it would mean to be encountering such a point of suture – leaving things there neglects the question of under what conditions is the suturing occurring? Under what conditions is the claim of untranslatability being made and with what consequences? Those are questions that lead us toward a different political horizon than the one that Cassin is offering generally, and certainly different from the one that Apter, who's one of Cassin's most attentive readers, offers. My sense is

that at those points of suture we need to enquire into what is disclosed, that is, the capture of both the labour of translation and the moment of translation by institutions, larger institutions that have always already spoken out and described and placed the value on the *kind* of labour that is to be performed repetitively at the moment of translation, and on the kind of *time* that it takes to perform that labour. In other words, the distinction that I would draw is to say well, given – ‘given’?! – or if we grant that there are things like untranslatables, and if we grant the work that is done by the claim of untranslatability, we have to take the further step of thinking of the time and the work of untranslatability as already taking place in the horizon of capture by late-stage capital, by information capital, and so on. This is something that is present in the *practice* of Cassin’s work. She is currently very engaged in thinking about different forms of AI and machine translation, the exceptionally interesting ways in which the corpus of materials that DeepL, Linguée and other AIs handle is primarily juridical and primarily enframed by the English search platform, and things of the sort. Primarily, to my mind, she’s thinking about these, though, not as expressions of a global political economy, and not as having a bearing on the ecological disaster (in as much as AI and machine translation are great drains on resources), but in ways in which those procedures, the AI procedure, the machine translation procedure, could increase the scope of untranslatability and increase the way... let’s see how to put this...and clarify what we mean by the work of translation and the time of translation.

One of your questions asks me about the lack of a reference to Marx in her work and the sustained presence of the conversation with Arendt and that, to my mind, is significant. I think that the view that I was just offering – which is the view that capital, as a machine for capturing time and labour and expressing time and labour as value predicates, can be associated with translation and with untranslatability – that this view makes the figure of untranslatability much more useful for a critique of global capital than I think it is in Cassin’s work. I’ve taken a kind of roundabout way back at your question, but perhaps not answered it fully.

Oliver Feltham: But there is this commonality between your work and Cassin’s with her polemic about Google that came out very early and made quite a splash in France. She was very early on concerned about algorithmic learning and machine translation, well before DeepL came out. You have this term where you talk about ‘machine translating’ as a particular phenomenon that you’re concerned to circumscribe or you see as something that’s emerging in your book *Untranslating Machines*. Is there a similarity of concern there?

Jacques Lezra: Yes, there is, quite so. Let me put this in a way that is, I think, implicit in *Untranslating Machines* but not made as explicit as it ought to be. One of the early developments in machine translation was dependent upon a conception of semantic transportation or of almost word-to-word, plus syntactical function. That seems to me now to have been the expression of a kind of idea of translation directed by the notion of the boundability of what you might call semantic objects or semantic fields. They *could* be boundable. And so to that extent there could be a translation

that went semantic object to semantic object by virtue of an algorithm in which both syntax and replacement were carried out upon the semantic objects. That is no longer the operating paradigm in machine and information and AI translation. It's no longer a paradigm of the integrity or to use the term from Badiou's entry on "Français," of the sovereignty of the bounded semantic object, of the semantic object as boundable. It's been replaced by, I think, something that isn't yet what I have in mind, but which is much more interesting, which is simply large-scale database searches in which expressions can be correlated to other expressions and offered without the supposition that there is an atomic semantic object that can be moved from one linguistic space to another linguistic space. You might say that this is a transposition of the AI and machine translation field from a mathematical conceptualization, or a domain, or a procedure that conceived of translation in the horizon of the mathematizability or formalizability of semantic objects, from there onto what simply operates upon a corpus, and compares the corpus of existing possible phrases to another corpus of existing possible phrases, and make substitutions and draws analogies between them, without requiring the mathematizability of the semantic object.

But there's a third way of proceeding, which is the one that I prefer, which is one that acknowledges that semantic objects are non-boundable. It sets aside the formal or mathematical principle. It also doesn't limit itself to the kind of practical consideration of huge databases, but rather focuses on the more intriguing philosophical problem of the non-boundability and thus the non-countability of semantic objects. I moved a little too quickly there when I say 'non-boundable therefore non-countable'. I'm making too quick a transition because you can have fuzzily boundable semantic objects that are more or less countable. You just need a much looser definition of what counts-as-one (*laughs*) in the field of translation, in the field of natural language. That's a discussion that we need to have, and it's at that point that something like materialism enters our discussion, because the way in which semantic objects are non-bounded is itself bound up with their horizons of usage, moments of inscription in different institutions, uses, different ends, histories of mediation, and in the different languages, and so on, including languages other than the ones that are both the origin or the target language, the translation. So I suppose that the most, the strongest way to put this, is to say that once you start working from the premise of the unboundability of semantic objects, you're also talking about the unboundability of natural languages, and therefore you're not ever talking about only translating between English and French: those are not bounded fields either. The act of moving between English and French is an act that passes through German, Italian, Hindu, Spanish, and undoes the objects, "English" and "French," from within and from without. How that act and how that process passes through is I think a little bit like what you were describing concerning this underground subterranean area (*laughs*) there, and it's what in my work I've referred to as 'wild mediation' or 'wild materialism'.

Oliver Feltham: There's a whole series of inquiries that branch off from what you've been talking about but I don't want to lose from view one of Barbara Cassin's larger interventions. I'm curious to see whether it's had an impact on your work, on your thinking, which is her repositioning of the sophists and this baptizing of this new field that will be called 'logology' or 'sophistics'. She shows quite convincingly here and there that the sophists are continually categorized and dismissed and marginalized by the dominant philosophical discourse today, right up to the present moment, both in the work of major philosophers, say reacting to Derrida's work by dismissing it as sophistry, or in the work of some of the great commentators and specialists in the sophists. I just wonder if you see consequences or ways of making sense of her attempt to reposition the sophists? What are the contemporary consequences of that repositioning?

Jacques Lezra: I think it's one of the major gestures in contemporary philosophy, that repositioning of the sophists, because what the figure of the sophist condenses is a variety of what have become shibboleths in the philosophical institution: a particular relation to the disclosing of truth, a particular characterization of being in language, a particular characterization of the city, of the *polis*, and of the standing of the philosopher in relation to the city. All of those are intimately tied into the characterization of the sophists and the exclusion of the sophists as well. Cassin's effort to bring the sophists back, or to reconfigure the figure of the sophist, seems to me crucial, partly because it brings us back to a different conception of truth and of the achieving of truth. In her work on South Africa and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission she links the notion of 'sufficient truth' to the sophists: 'enough truth for X'; the usability or functionality of truth. Truth is a functioning device and is a device that has to be produced, judged, assessed according to uses and to the principle of sufficiency. It's truth enough for something, always. That seems to me to be an absolutely critical contribution to contemporary philosophy and also to contemporary political philosophy quite specifically, because it requires us to set aside the way in which claims to truth can be settled into a given institution, or a given position, or a given charismatic figure, and settled into it in a way that *remains* settled. So sophistical practice is a practice of unsettling the positioning of truth within an institution, a speaking voice, or a speaking position. It's quite an extraordinary destabilizing of the classic conception of institution and of the classic conception of charismatic leadership as being able to speak the truth and as being the subject that possesses the truth. If truth is only to be, if truth is primarily to be assessed as, sufficiency or sufficient truth *for* this or that, then we are in a different situation entirely, because the 'for this or that' is always going to change with material conditions and circumstances and requirements and needs. So truth is going to be highly conditioned to the needs of the moment and to moments of expression. It's a very radicalizing position, it seems to me, and one which will take us a lot of time to figure out how to include in discussions of political philosophy and of the possible futures of philosophy in the public sphere.

Oliver Feltham: Let's keep going on this question of truth. I'm thinking about truth claims made by genres of academic discourse. So within particular disciplines, with scholarship that follows the rules of the genres of scholarship, and is published in academic journals, we're making truth claims about our objects. I was just thinking, we've both been through particular theories in the anglophone academy apart from others, in which, in the worlds of high theory, genres were sometimes blurred, sometimes mixed. People experimented with genre. Then we come to France, in which academia in general is fairly conservative. There are publishing houses that will not publish certain texts. Cassin tells the story of her editor not wanting to publish her book on Austin as a complementary piece to *L'effet sophistique*. Cassin publishes books that are halfway between autobiography and philosophical reflection. Are there some interesting parallels there?

Jacques Lezra: Yes, I mean any genre is, well it entails and sets in place modalities for claiming truth and establishing truth. So, on the one hand, then, you would say, well, okay, so let 1000 genres bloom. Contesting genres and competing genres will all, will each entail a different, slightly different but mutually translatable figure of how to claim truth. So if I'm a physical scientist, my truth claims will be made in one genre, if I'm a psychoanalyst in perhaps another one, if I'm a historian, yet another one. So a kind of perspectivism is entailed that multiplies the number of possible ways in which truth can be claimed by indexing it to the different genres: speech genres, academic genres, ordinary language genres that we can all handle. What I think is extraordinary about Cassin's work is that it takes place on a second level with regard to that multiplicity or multiplication of generic claims to truth by saying, well, what is it that they have in common that allows these claims to be recognizable and transmissible and translatable from genre to genre to genre? The seeming step is toward a universal of some sort that would underlie the multiplication of generic truth claims and make them mutually intelligible because of a common participation in the universal way of claiming truths. That is specifically what Cassin's work will attack: that kind of crypto-Platonism that unifies the radical plurality and diversity of 'truth-claimings' by means of a hidden or structuring universal which makes them translatable amongst each other. That's where the sophisticated effect enters, it seems to me. It's a disaggregation of the unifying principle of the translatability of truth claims across genres. The consequences of that are, as I was saying before, I think, really as yet unthought. We don't yet know what the consequences of that are for philosophy. Minimally, I think we can register that it's an important and even decisive move by registering how much opposition it creates. It's really difficult to get philosophers to agree that a kind of radical pluralism, a plurality of worlds – it's almost a kind of Lewisian pluralism there – is in fact, entailed and can flow from this undoing of the hidden universality or the hidden claim to the universal. That's a universal that we find in most standard accounts of the pluralism of truth claims.

Oliver Feltham: This suspicion or possibility of a hidden claim to the universal is something that you clearly get in certain interpretations of Alain Badiou's work

because he does have a set theoretical model of what the unfolding of truth procedure is going to look like – it's a generic multiple. I think that one of the fascinating encounters in contemporary philosophy has been between Cassin and Badiou.

Jacques Lezra: I completely agree.

Oliver Feltham: In particular, I was wondering if, I mean, there's so much separating them and at the same time, so many bridges to be drawn. But one of the ways they obviously found a way of bridging their difference was talking about gender and philosophy: what it meant to be a man doing philosophy nowadays and what it meant to be a woman doing philosophy nowadays.

Jacques Lezra: Yes, and I think also both of them demonstrate a commitment to thinking of philosophy as a conversational practice that way. You see that, for example, in Badiou's rewriting of the *Republic*, which is not only a restaging of a conversation, but is an enacting of a conversation with a Platonic precursor, and the offer of a genre of philosophical composition that is based in conversation not in the trivial sense but in an agonistic sense, even in a radically antagonistic sense. I think that is shared by the two of them. In Cassin's case, the modality of philosophical conversation – and perhaps this is something that makes the conversation with Badiou so fruitful – is that the frame is, can be likened to a Socratic frame, in as much as there is a continuing conversation with figures that can be occupied at different moments by either philosopher that works primarily by means of irony and by contesting the positioning of the interlocutor in a way that also reflects a questioning of the position of the voice that is making it, or performing the questioning of the interlocutor's position. I think that they share that. It's what has enabled the conversation about gender in philosophy to be so prosperous and so powerful for both of them.

Oliver Feltham: Can I take you towards your diagnosis of the situation of the humanities in the contemporary university faced with the various types of management techniques that are daily tried out on recalcitrant or ungovernable academics? What, if any, help do you see coming from a figure like Barbara Cassin for the work of diagnosis, the critical response, the resistance to such practices?

Jacques Lezra: I think Cassin's work is wonderfully useful here because in the contemporary neoliberal university, and increasingly the sovereign, governing paradigm – and I mean 'governing' in the strong sense, it's the paradigm that *governs* and subordinates and calculates the value of the production of knowledge – the governing paradigm is based on a particular translatability paradigm which has a great deal in common with what I was earlier referring to as the notion that semantic objects are countable. My impression is that the kind of neoliberal regime towards which the governance of the university is inclining at the moment – as is absolutely well-known, Bill Reading has written about this, all sorts of people have written about this – entails a kind of managerial vision of knowledge that envisions knowledge objects, the production of knowledge, in ways that can be counted,

compared, and the relative efficiencies and relative values assessed. That's a model of formal translation, it's a model of truth, of equivalences, and a model in which equivalences are made between quite different areas. So when earlier I was talking about the pluralism of genres and the consequent pluralism of truth, of modalities of truth-claiming being subordinated to a hidden universal understanding of the disposability of truth by means of genres, this is, if you like, precisely the paradigm that is at work in the management model of the neoliberal university. The hidden but not so hidden universal value is the value of, the market value of, the education. What kind of product is the educated student? How does the production of this or that bit of semantically boundable knowledge, how does that contribute to producing such an also countable object as the well-educated undergraduate consumer? This is all fairly standard, but into this fairly standard and smooth construction, or characterization, of the logic of management and the neoliberal university, into that comes the question of the possible non-translatability of, or untranslatability among, modes of producing knowledge and amongst the objects produced, the knowledge objects produced within the university. This is where Cassin's work seems absolutely necessary. It allows us to insist that the work of the university is not only the work of producing translatable, semantically boundable objects of knowledge, but of continuing the process of negotiating the non-translatability of such knowledge objects amongst different truth regimes. It installs in the logic of the university the need to *compensate*. I mean, it's almost a financial proposition: it's the need to compensate for that second-order reflection which is the reflection upon the non-translatability of objects of knowledge amongst disciplines. That becomes *itself* a necessary constant, irreducible, repeated and eternal part of the university, an incalculable cost but also an unmanageable surplus value. So Cassin's work in that sense opens up the university away from the market-orientated account of the pluralism of knowledge objects that can be understood within this larger framework of their comparability and their translatability in the horizon of the way that they contribute to the production of the consuming individual, and it orients us toward a different conception of the labour of the, in the, university. It makes *that* orientation also part of what the managerial class would call the 'value proposition' of the university: it's a radically intrusive procedure. It can be made and I think that Cassin's work goes in this direction. It needs to, it needs to be, it can be theorized and almost rendered programmatic if we see, if we take the comment you were making earlier about her unwillingness to stick to a genre. From her now extraordinarily powerful public position, she is writing philosophy differently. That means that it's no longer possible to think of philosophy departments and the kind of genre of philosophy writing that is practised within those departments as exclusive to the history of the genre of philosophical writing, because it now must include the way that Cassin is writing autobiographically, semi-autobiographically about themes and projects and problems that are not the classic ones in philosophy departments. Her performance of philosophy is a performance also of the unbounding of the philosophical object and of the philosophical discipline in a way that is consistent with the way that the concept of untranslatability enters into

and ultimately disrupts the tendency toward that kind of formalized, translatable conceptualization of object knowledge production that we get in the neoliberal university.

Oliver Feltham: I was thinking about... I still have this, I'm still fascinated with this sort of almost, well it's not a defined or finite method, but this idea of opening up these unbounded semantic fields and then exploring the contiguity that they have through contested translations of the particular primary text. In your work, I see...because what emerges is this figure of infinity – and obviously for those who fear the sophists, and fear Derrida's work when it started to be translated in and read in Comparative Literature departments across the English speaking university – it's a figure of a 'bad infinity', of infinite regress: we are never going to get to a definition statement or a thesis point. I think that's something that Cassin's work very fruitfully reawakens, that fear of the sophists, because she restores full power to the sophists' discourse by showing how Aristotle failed to demonstrate that their discourse was incoherent, how Plato failed to demonstrate that their discourse is incoherent. So she restores that power. There is this reawakening of this fear. There's also something quite similar in your work in *On the Nature of Marx's Things: Translation as Necrophilology* when you raise this huge question about the use of things. You start to talk about moments in Marx's work when he's talking about Lucretius' grand poem of nature, and in which there is the level of the object of the thing, the level of the discourse or statements about the thing, and then the meta-discourse about that discourse. What seems to be your interest is when those levels converge or conflate or get blurred.

Jacques Lezra: Yes, look, quite, very much so. I'm interested in two things that happen simultaneously. In the description that you just gave of an object discourse, the discourse regarding the object and then the meta-discourse regarding the relation, what occurs in translations is very often, not exactly a blurring, but a collapsing and then a crossing of these discursive domains, which then one can work to re-establish and one *must* work to re-establish in order to keep some kind of minimal coherence to one's statements. If I don't know whether I'm talking about an object or talking about talking about an object, things get extremely messy, and the way that truth claims can be made at each one of those levels is slightly different. The value of the truth that is claimed on each of those different levels is different. When there is this kind of collapse – or the word that I prefer because it's a Lucretian word, *fall*, between these discourses – then the rules of genre, cultural rules, cultural norms, require pulling these discourses back into a more or less perspicuous relation that can be maintained until it falls apart again, or until the discourses fall into each other again. There are different ways of construing that falling together of these different discursive domains. One of them would simply say, it would want to argue, well, this is just what happens when in natural language you try to make claims about things. Natural languages don't have the formal procedure, they don't have the formal strength to allow for a robust distinction to be maintained between

these different levels. So they're going to fall into each other simply because we use natural languages.

This leaves open the historicity of the falling into each other of these different discursive domains. Under what conditions do they fall into each other? What makes that fall have one or another kind of consequence for truth, for society, for conversation? What happens when the falling into each other of these different domains seems to follow a rule, seems to obey a rule, but that rule is itself not part of any of these discursive domains, but is part of, let's say, material, a material frame, in which the language is produced. That's where my work wants the pressure to come: at that level of the question. Where, how and under what circumstances is the swerve into each other of these three discursive domains produced, with what consequences, and what could we draw from that for politics? Let's say that we're ready to agree to something like this: that in conventional politics the order of discourses is maintained by institutions which have a kind of perpetuating and self-perpetuating function, which serve to, which exist in order to produce certain kinds of objects and certain kinds of subjects who can assess the value of those objects and use them in different ways. If this is our very classical and very conventional conception of the relation between politics and institutions, then how do we account in that model for this falling together of discursive orders? Can we generate institutions that are able to take account of the way in which their objects, the objects that they produce and the subjects that they produce, sometimes cross positions, lose their boundaries, become inaccessible and become unnameable within the context of those institutions, at different moments, at different times, and to different effects? This is what my work is trying to figure out now. If the books on *Untranslating Machines*, on *Marx's Things* and necrophilology, if those were projects that really intended to show what it might be like to think about semantic objects as not boundable within particular conditions, now the work is to think about the consequences for constructing commonalities of interest, desire, pleasure and pain, which can be derived from that description of how we handle objects and subjects.

Oliver Feltham: I think it would be obviously very interesting to explore the possibility of an institution of education, of higher learning, that was capable of actually accounting for, or taking responsibility for, the 'world-effects' of its own discourse – what is the effect of the continual use of a certain rhetoric by the university leadership? What effect does that produce on students? – beyond the current concerns with new modalities of politeness and using certain names and pronouns. But going beyond that to, as you say, to moments at which it is the institution itself that is partly responsible for these 'falls' of discourse.

Jacques Lezra: The nature of what that responsibility is... so in, in what ways is an institutional responsible for what befalls in it? That seems to me crucial because, tangentially, you might say, institutions are responsible, are, in fact definitionally, responsible for everything within them, that's the nature of the institution, and that responsibility – well, you have to take account of how objects are produced

within the institution, what is included, what is excluded. Indeed the subjects that the institution produces are just that, entities responsible for and to what's produced *by* the institution. Those are sort of definitional aspects of the institution. An institution works in order to produce this sort of thing by excluding, by including, by producing these kinds of continuities, by affirming the value of certain positions as figures of inclusion, exclusion and production of objects, production of subjectivity and responsibility, and so on. This is the way classic institutions work within that classic meta-institution, which is the modern state. There's an absolute homology between state and university on these grounds. Universities are also a kind of meta-institution in which smaller-order or lower-order institutions function in relative concert under the guidance of, and the over-arching unification procedures of that meta-institution, the University, where these micro-institutions operate. What would it mean to look for modes of institution that are not amenable to being counted, essentially? This is what we're looking for. So that the institutions, like the unbounded semantic objects that we were talking about before, these kinds of positions would be, would have, radically fuzzy edges. Thus many of their principles, of their classic principles, of inclusion and exclusion, the principle of bounding, the principle of coherence, the principle of identity: all of these, which tremble on the edge between the classical logical formulations and the formulations of institutional theory, get changed, right? They have to be abandoned. So you're looking at that point for conceptions of institution which do not remit to a classic logic of identity, sufficiency, coherence, continuity, etcetera, *but* which, *and* which, in not remitting to those, open up toward procedures of inclusion and exclusion of differently defined "objects" of knowledge, or students, or disciplines, or outcomes, that are not the ones that the classic university had, procedures of creating value and devaluing that are not those of the classic institution. So it seems to me this also opens up towards procedures of comparing and relating institutions in ways that are not the translation of those institutions in the context of a meta-institution which makes them countable, if you see what I mean. It's a tall order to produce such a political description of institutions. But I do think that the operators that Cassin is giving us – untranslatability, the sophisticated effect – are major ways of producing precisely that kind of redescription of institutions. This is a very interesting thing to say regarding someone who herself is a member of the most ritualized and classically constituted institution in France, perhaps one of the most formal, in this sense, in Europe (though as I say this I remember the vast machinery of the Church, and I'm forced back from my hyperbole). It's really extraordinary that her thinking, that she can think from within the constraints of those institutions.

Oliver Feltham: When you were talking there about the meta-institution, the modern state and the homology with the modern university, I was thinking about a passage when you're writing about Hobbes and the transfer of rights, and I'm thinking about your attention to early European modernity and the importance of the colonial moment. It seems to be a major thematic in your work.

Jacques Lezra: Yes.

Oliver Feltham: To harp on this theme, there's a phrase that you wrote that really struck me where you talk about translation being both a resource and a limit to European colonial modernity. I was wondering, are there contemporary avatars of that resource and limit, that double identity of translation, that we're still dealing with nowadays as scholars and as citizens?

Jacques Lezra: That's a wonderful question and I'm inclined to answer it in two ways. One is that – and these are related – English, and the universalization of English as the language of trade, economy, even diplomacy, was for the creation of the modern European state both a resource and an obvious limit. It was a resource in as much as it produced an analogue for a common culture, and a common conceptualization of being-in-common that was carried by the English language and by all of the resources of English. It was a limit because it installed a single language as the domain in which that commonality could be imagined and which figured that commonality as remitting to a single language, not just any language, but the language of commerce, of the colony, of the world order as it was established in the course of the 20th century. The same thing could be said about the rise of technology; that is, it serves that same double function of resource and limit as I've just described it. It has the function *qua* technology of communication, of enabling the transmission of information, of enabling the creation of spontaneous communities, of social communities, as we all know. The limits that are proposed are similarly the limits of the technology, but also the limits of the technological imagination, which is indissociable from the actual technology itself. So it's not only – just as English is not only, the use of English is not only the use of the instrument English, but it's also the acquiescence to the cultural value of English – so the use of technology is not just the use of this or that technological means, it's also a relation to the technological conceptualization of the world that is carried by specific technologies and enables specific technologies. So in both of those ways, I think we have examples of resource-limit couplings. What I think is important is to understand the historical dimension of resource-limit couplings of that sort. It's not the same thing – and I think this goes to the first part of your question – it's not the same thing to speak of a resource-limit couple in the 20th century, to establish how a resource-limit couple works in the 20th and 21st century, as it is to see how that works in the 16th and 17th century. There are certain continuities. We live in the shadow of a kind of colonial idea that is set in place for the West in those years, and that's certainly a continuity. But what counts as resource and what counts as limit are different in the two moments. Although there is an analogy to be drawn between them, it's an analogy with a sufficiently complex and intractably overdetermined set of mediations between what happens in the 16th-17th centuries and what happens today, that the couplet of resource and limitation, although it has a kind of explanatory value for thinking about that moment, is also itself both a resource and a limitation for us today. It's a resource in as much as it allows us to see in early modernity the colonial precursor to the economies that we are embedded

in today, but it's a limit inasmuch as it makes that particular configuration appear to be the cause and the structuring element behind today's colonial configuration: thus putting in the past, the remote past, the origins of something that is constantly being produced and reproduced in the present. It's very tricky because it is a multi-levelled question.

Oliver Feltham: One last question to bring you back to one of your favourite figures, Pico de la Mirandola. It's a simple question. What does – again asking you to bridge, to jump, between different historical epochs – what does, if anything, Pico have to tell us about the human condition?

Jacques Lezra: Pico is offered up as the exemplar of Renaissance humanism, a syncretist, a peripatetic, polypathetic and polymathic thinker who is capable of bringing Plato into dialogue with diverse religions – and who is in that respect an extremely appealing figure. His work – and in particular the work that I've thought about the most, which is the *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, that famous introduction to a set of theses – includes the parable of the human, and of the position of the human, which seems to me useful to us today, because one might say something like this: the human, and the position of humanism, is the last redoubt, it's the last position that is assumed by biopolitical governance. Biopolitical governance and institutional consolidation and the creation of a single world smoothed over by the common application of the laws of capital and the conditions of capital – the last ground upon which those propositions can be defended today is *the human*. So today humanism has been entirely captured in its classical form, that is, by all of the regimes of capture – economic, social, political – that have also gone into the neoliberalization of the university and the creation of the global market of markets that we call globalization. But if you attend to Pico and really get into his conceptualization of the positioning of the human you will find – to my mind at least, I hope so – you will find that the way that he conceives of the human has a great deal to do with what I was earlier describing as the unboundedness, the unbounding, of the semantic object. In Pico, you might say, the couplet resource-limitation is God-human. The plan that God makes for the scheme of the world, a completely regimented and understood plan in which everything has its place and there's a place for everything, excludes the human and very famously, thus in compensation, endows the human with the capacity to make itself part of any of the different positions in the scheme of being. That same description also gives us a sense of what you might call God's weakness, or the debility of the instituting figure, the divine instituting figure. What kind of divinity is it that doesn't have in advance a knowledge of the position that is to be given to the human, to the witness, to the last figure that God produces? Pico is, I think, flirting with very radical heterodoxy there, a heterodoxy that presents us with the image of the divinity that is ignorant of the ends of its project, and doesn't have in advance a sufficiently mathematized view of the project so as to include that last figure, the figure of the human. The heterodoxy with which Pico is flirting here has to do with God's foresight, God's foreknowledge, and thus God's being in time. My sense

is that the last redoubt of the smoothing logics of capital, which is the human, bumps up against the debility of the instituting figure, the debility, the weakness, the heterodoxy, the incompleteness of a God who is able to grant that position of universal mediator and universal equalizer to the human, but only at the expense of installing, of instituting the figure of a God who is incomplete with respect to its temporality and its power. So Pico's very long and very important shadow has too clearly fallen on the side of promoting an idea of the human-as-universal, whereas the shadow also includes this other aspect, which is a concomitant *demotion* or even *derogation*, as it were, of a principle of divine institution and of the institution as divine, as closed, as responsible, and as auto-responsible.

Oliver Feltham: You have finished with the lack in the Other.

Jacques Lezra: I do finish with the lack of the Other.

JOHN MCKEANE

COGITATING WITH BARBARA CASSIN

Ontology, Sophistics, Feminine Voice

What does it mean to cogitate with Barbara Cassin? If cogitating is simply taken to mean thinking, then to follow her thought is to question the supremacy of the One over the Many, to reject gestures that legitimize the former by excluding the latter. But if cogitating is taken as an echo of the Cartesian *cogito*, then we are able to be more precise about Cassin's role in contemporary thought.

This is not to say that Cassin is a neo-Cartesian, for whom the *cogito* would represent a line drawn in the sand, an attempt to establish a firm basis for a system of thinking. Instead, to speak of cogitation enables us to look at the way Cassin deals with the tension between the two sides of the equation, as it were, of *I think therefore I am*: thinking and being. She does this via her engagement with early Greek philosophy, notably Parmenides, whose poem 'On Nature or Being' claims that 'being and thinking are a single and same thing' (Cassin, *Si Parménide* 44).¹ This claim is foundational for the ontological tradition in philosophy, and throughout her career Cassin examines the setting, implications, and noteworthy refutations of this claim. To this end, she produces multiple major publications: from *Si Parménide: Le traité anonyme De Melisso Xenophane Gorgia. Édition critique et commentaire / If Parmenides: the Anonymous Treatise On Melissus, Xenophanes, and Gorgias. Critical Edition and Commentary* (650 pages, 1980), to *L'Effet sophistique / The Sophistical Effect* (700 pages, 1995), looking at the 'sophistical' others of the ontological tradition; and from a critical edition of Parmenides's Poem itself, *Sur la nature ou sur l'étant: La langue de l'être? / On Nature or On the Existent: the Language of Being?* (1998) to a treatment of the foundational myth of Helen of Troy addressing the same questions, *Voir Hélène en toute femme: d'Homère à Lacan / Seeing Helen in Every Woman: from Homer to Lacan* (2000).²

These activities are the driving force behind the career that has seen Cassin become well known as the editor of the *Dictionary of Untranslatables* (2004/2014), member of the Académie française (2018-), and more. The critical work of tracing Cassin's best-known positions back to her emergence and evolution as a noteworthy figure

still needs to be undertaken, and that is the path on which this article sets out. I therefore hope to provide important pieces of the context for the prominent role she now occupies in French and continental thought.

We shall therefore begin by reading Cassin on Parmenides. This means studying her exposition of his ‘Poem on Nature or Being’ in its importance for ontologizing philosophies – up to and including Heidegger – which claim a privileged, direct access to being, nature, or reality. Our first section will therefore establish what Cassin takes to be the claims of ontology and the various advantages they present. While taking this tradition as a worthy interlocutor, Cassin is not content to remain within it, and my following three sections track her as she makes this move beyond ontology. She does so by combining in virtuosic ways the rival, ancient tradition of ‘sophistics’, and a privileging of feminine voices in canonical episodes from Greek mythology and literature (a fore-taste of her provocative approach can be found in the statement ‘the first women I came across in philosophy were the Sophists’; Cassin, *Sophistical Practice* 5).³ Our second section explores why this double, sophistical-feminine move beyond ontology might be possible or necessary by setting out what Cassin takes to be the rebarbative masculinity of that school of thought. Once this is established, it becomes possible to move to the final two sections, in which Cassin re-examines two treatments of femininity (and more specifically, feminine voice or discourse) in ancient Greek culture. These treatments address the Sirens who tempt Ulysses in the *Odyssey*, an episode which Cassin presents as being cited significantly in Parmenides’s ‘Poem on Nature or Being’, and the figure of Helen of Troy in her interactions with the same Ulysses. Across these various discussions, we hope to set out Cassin’s thinking with its compelling mix of erudition, vivacious aphoristic expression, and concern for movement and vitality.

1. The Claims of Ontology

In order to come to our aim of examining how Cassin moves beyond ontology (via a sophistical-feminine voice) and the reasons for her doing so (its supposed masculinity), we must first establish the basic tenets of that school of thought. A key interlocutor of Cassin’s, as of any contemporary French discussion of ontology, is of course Martin Heidegger, but her contribution in this context is made by way of a thinker at the other end of the ontological tradition, the Greek pre-Socratic Parmenides. Cassin edits a French edition of Parmenides’s sole known work, a fragmentary poem sometimes referred to as ‘On Nature’, and for which she proposes a double title, ‘On Nature or on the Existent [*l’étant*]’ (Parmenides, *Sur la nature ou sur l’étant*). The latter term is difficult to translate in English, being a substantivized present participle, with the sense of an existent or *being* that is actively in the process of existing or being.

The active, verb-like quality of Parmenides's term combines with another grammatical feature, which is to exploit Greek's capacity for this being to remain free of any predicate, giving a sense that can only be awkwardly translated in English as 'being is', 'being exists', or 'there is being'. Thus the being or *étant* does not exist in any particular way (it is not large or small, colourful or monotone, happy or sad, etc.), but just *is*.⁴ This is what provides the impulse informing ontological philosophy: to examine that which is shared by all beings in existence or in the world, above and beyond any differentiated attributes they might have. What is the being that all beings share? How can we think about such beings in a rigorously equal way, beyond the infinitely distracting worlds of local or cultural difference? For thinkers in this Parmenidean tradition, philosophy is the pursuit of such absolute even-handedness, and the rejection of culturally-specific special pleading. Being, or what really is, or the way things ultimately are, is the proper subject of philosophy, and to this end one must reject distracting 'noise'. Parmenides gives the example of anything that is born or dies as such a distraction, because its relationship to being is inconstant (Sedley 118). In this spirit one would not then study the exploits of individual humans (even symbolic or representative ones, such as Ulysses, as we shall see), though one could study the underlying, permanent forces at work in their lives (e.g. any shared human nature that becomes apparent through accumulated examples). In short, with Parmenides solidity and permanency are privileged, and abstraction from the individual or local level is not some unfortunate side-effect, but the very methodology of rigorous thought.

Such is the universalising force behind ontology's attention to being that it has little bandwidth left over that would enable it to pay attention to the way that being is framed and shaped by language or discourse. This is where we can find Cassin's main interest in, and points of contention with, Parmenides. Cassin tells us that 'the poem sets out to follow "the path of 'is'", where being, thinking and speaking belong to one another' (Cassin, *La Nostalgie* 42). Cassin unpicks this supposedly unproblematic mutual belonging of being and the way in which we think and speak about it – the supposed ability for being to enter the realm of language with little or no resistance, reframing or reshaping. In order to counter this claimed mutual belonging of being and language, Cassin's critical edition spends considerable time setting out the way the Poem provides narrative framing for the lesson on the topics of being and non-being which is dispensed to the narrator-protagonist by a goddess he is taken to meet.⁵

Being and non-being are presented as two radically divergent paths, and the unnamed traveller is strongly enjoined to follow the former.⁶ Following the latter would be wasted effort, as nothing can be known or expressed about non-being. Non-being has no inner necessity, is only fleeting appearance, and indeed those who are distracted by it are condemned to turn back on themselves, to become as if dumb and blind, to plunge into 'dark night, a dense and heavy body' (Parmenides, *Fragments* 75).⁷ Far better to concentrate on that which stands above the ephemeral, is without beginning or end, and has its own inner necessity. The positive, true

path, albeit one less often trod, is that of this being, and Parmenides describes it in various ways: like a flame, burning equally on all sides, or like a sphere, emanating out from its centre in absolute equality, without privileging one direction or one plane over any other. This physical model stands for a philosophical principle of certainty or foundation, against which the ever-changing human world can be measured. Due to the solidity with which this model binds being and the thinking of that being, Parmenides's thinking has been authoritatively described as the precursor or 'grandfather' of Descartes's *cogito* (Leonard 22).

Despite all of this, Cassin's ultimate strategy is to undermine Parmenides's reputation as 'the first true philosopher, which is to say the first Platonist or, at least, the first rationalist' (in Parmenides, *Sur la nature* 17). She begins to draw out interpretative tension with the statement which opens the Poem's fragment VIII: 'Only remains therefore the tale of the way / "is"' (Parmenides, *Sur la nature* 85). The question for Cassin is how seriously to take the trope of the path here; is this just a figure of speech enabling an understanding of being as opposed to non-being? Or is the path, road, or way to be understood in a stronger sense, with being only able to be glimpsed by those who depart on a journey, making space for mobility, change, becoming? It seems probable that Cassin's sympathies lie with the second possibility. To see this more fully, we must look in more depth at what she presents as her specific contribution to scholarly understanding of Parmenides's Poem.⁸ This contribution is to signal that the Poem quotes line-for-line another episode of a traveller along a path, *the* traveller in ancient Greek culture, the masculine Ulysses as he meets the feminine Sirens. But before we come to this central aspect of Cassin's reading, in the latter sections of this piece, we must pause to draw out the stakes of her objections to ontology in terms of gender.

2. What is Masculine about Ontology?

In our final two sections, on Cassin's readings of Ulysses's encounters with the Sirens and with Helen of Troy, we will see (missed) encounters with feminine voices being placed explicitly at the centre of the way Greek (and later Western) culture constructed (and constructs) its mythology. But what will later be explicit is already implicit, for Cassin, in the functioning of ontological thought, that other expression of Greek and broader Western culture, insofar as ontology claims to avoid falling into superstition, instead claiming to pay due attention to reality (or what really is, or being).⁹ This is to say that although there is little or no explicit thematization of gender in ontology, starting with Parmenides, in fact it betrays patterns of thought that display characteristics of masculinity.¹⁰

Take the claimed rigour of the thought of being, as discussed above. Seen positively, this is a righteous discourse concerned with even-handedness or equality, and with implications for justice both epistemically and socially. But if seen negatively, it can provide expression for arid abstraction – Cassin calls being 'the abstraction

of abstractions' (*Debate*) –, speaking to a detachment from worldly minutiae and differences that leaves one comfortably numb. Abstraction leads to a lack of nuance, to insensitivity; and indeed Parmenides's ultra-rationalist position has been described as the following: '[t]here are no half-truths. No proposition is both true and false. No question can be coherently answered "Yes and no."' (Sedley 115). This might appear pleasingly coherent and elegant in its own terms; it nonetheless seems an unhelpful attitude in many situations. Does ontology, with its stock-in-trade methodology of abstraction and its claim to stand above the world, ultimately shrink from that world, out of fear of its complexity?

Cassin's aim of unpicking the co-belonging of being, thought, and speech means she is sympathetic to such positioning. To take there to be a natural, unproblematic bond between being and thinking, between Descartes's *I think* and his *I am*, is surely more likely when one has been culturally conditioned to believe that what one thinks or says is true.¹¹ Or when one has been similarly conditioned to believe that it is possible to express – directly, without compromises with institutional power-structures – the way things really are.¹² Displaying masculine gender seems very likely to contribute strongly to the likelihood of adopting such positions. While ontological philosophy is not explicitly concerned with privileging one gender, it can come to be associated with masculinity in this roundabout way. Cassin's institutional self-positioning suggests that she holds this to be the case; she refuses to simply 'rehabilitate' sophistic thinking (*Sophistical Practice*, 14), as this would leave the hierarchies of power in place, merely inverted. She titles one of her major works 'the sophistic effect' because she is aware that it suits the aims of rationalist philosophy to be able to export or project certain ways of thinking onto an artificially-created sophistic other, i.e. to create a sophistic than is more a secondary effect than it is its own reality.¹³ And she has written of the way in which the French academic institution sought to 'situate her work as literature or memoir, thus excluding it from being properly philosophical. Strikingly, she tells us that to conform to this situating would be no more radical, for a woman, than 'making a chicken casserole'.¹⁴

We must therefore proceed with care when discussing the genre into which Cassin's writings fall. Nonetheless, while she defends her right to be considered a philosopher with full privileges (as it were), she also does maintain an expressive, wide-ranging approach more characteristic of the figure of the intellectual in broader French culture. It is from this strand of her work that we can take two examples illustrating her approach to the implicit masculinity of ontology. Each is a laconic utterance, to be found in multiple locations across her various modes of interventions as a renowned figure in contemporary French culture. The first ironizes the position of someone who takes as read the co-belonging of being and speaking, which is to say that it represents in miniature Parmenides's position. In fact the statement – in blue language – is by Cassin's maternal grandmother, and consists in the observation that 'thirty-six arse cheeks make eighteen arses' (Cassin, *Avec le plus petit*, 22; and as epigraph to *Jacques le Sophiste*). The

grandmother intended this as a no-nonsense debunking of supposed attempts at sophisticated discourse; but the humour intended by Cassin in her use of the phrase comes from the sheer obviousness or redundancy of the observation. By adopting this catchphrase in an apparently rationalist spirit, for which being and thinking/speaking belong to one another without remainder, the grandmother prepares the way for Cassin to elaborate a more complex view of the relationship between language and reality. The second statement goes to the other extreme, insofar as it condenses the thinking of someone who has broken free of the assumption that reality and language 'belong to one another' (Cassin, *La Nostalgie* 42). It stems from another of Cassin's family legends, namely that during WWII, when soldiers came to seize her Jewish father, they were greeted on the doorstep by her mother, of Catholic French origin, drawing herself up and stating in fake outrage 'me, marry a Jew, never!' (Cassin, *Avec le plus petit*, 24). This is the statement of someone who has managed to dissociate the effect she wishes an utterance to produce on the person before her (the German soldiers) from any obligation to be ultimately truthful.¹⁵ As the wife of a Jew, she playacts as someone horrified at the thought of marrying a Jew. Thus the relationship of speech to what really *is* is able – or rather is forced, on pain of deportation and death – to alter fundamentally.

3. Parmenides and the Sirens

We have attempted to show that, for Cassin's thinking, there is an implicit masculine bias in ontology, insofar as it is a thinking that considers the ultimate epistemic equality of all beings rather than helping to dismantle lived inequalities in this world. We can now move to two areas where she discusses explicit treatments of femininity in the Greek and broader Western tradition. What's more, each of these shows a close intrication of femininity and voice, thus aligning with the sense that for Cassin, to move beyond ontology means that it is necessary to foreground sophistics and femininity together.

The first of these areas is found in the Parmenides Poem discussed above. If the goddess that the adventurer encounters presents him with two paths, that of being and that of non-being, Cassin lays her emphasis on the fact that we are dealing with paths here. Being (if that is indeed to be the path chosen) is not simply waiting to be found as pre-existing language, but instead reaches full self-realization only through an enunciation in language. Accordingly, language is – as it were – an dynamic reactant here, rather than just another ingredient to make up the numbers. Cassin's emphasis on the path leads her to discuss one episode in particular, when Parmenides directly quotes the Homeric verses depicting Ulysses's encounter with the Sirens. This episode is all the more significant insofar as Parmenides intends Ulysses's stance when tied to the mast to provide an image of the solidity of being, according to the thought that, as we saw above, Parmenides takes only that which is unmoving – unbeginning and unending – as truly worthy of the designation 'being'.

Now, the hero of the *Odyssey* is not named by Parmenides, but by the precise quotation of verses, including metrical features, Cassin argues that the reference would have been unmistakable within ancient Greek culture. But even if such a writerly move is or was readily comprehensible, why should it be significant? It seems far from revolutionary for a Greek thinker to quote Homer. However, we should remember Parmenides's scientific claim to speak of a being in a sense that is equally or neutrally applicable to all existents in the world. If being is truly being, then it must be – in equal measure – the being of a stone, of an animal, of a human, of a mathematical number. It would be striking for such claimed philosophical rigour, the new dawn of Western thought saluted by Heidegger and many others, to collapse back onto the local, culturally-specific model of a named adventurer, Ulysses, however symbolic or exemplary he may be.

Let us come to the detail of the episode cited palimpsestically by Parmenides, Ulysses's encounter with the Sirens. The relevant section of fragment VIII of the Poem reads:

Moreover, changeless in the limits of great chains
 [It] is un-beginning and unceasing, since coming-to-be and perishing
 Have been driven far off, and true trust has thrust them out.
 Remaining the same and in the same, [it] lies by itself
 And remains thus firmly in place; for strong Necessity
 Holds [it] fast in the chains of a limit, which fences it about
 (Parmenides, *Fragments* 69).

The palimpsestic quotation here allows Cassin to identify the chains as those binding Ulysses to his mast, preventing his being drawn to the alluring Sirens' song (which he nonetheless listens to with unstopped ears, unlike his crew of rowers). The emphasis in these Homeric lines is on the solidity of his footing, the strength of his stance, and the self-containedness of a system that goes from the same to the same without significant dalliance with the other. There is of course some, residual relation to the other, which represents either Ulysses's ingenuity or his cowardice (depending on one's perspective). He listens to the Sirens' song without suffering the usual fatal consequences; he defeats their magical spell, tames the forces of nature and lives to tell his triumphant tale. Western man is born. For her part, Cassin is intensely interested in all that goes on in this half-missed, half-pursued encounter, and her strategy is to consider matters from the point of view of the feminine Sirens. In the published version of her account of this moment in Parmenides, she writes that

[t]he Sirens name Ulysses using his name of glory, and essentially propose that he hear the *Iliad*, which he knows only too well, having lived it. [...] the

Sirens create a short caricature of epic within the epic itself, one intended to capture and kill the hero (Parmenides, *Sur la nature* 61).

This 'short caricature of epic within the epic itself' recentres the Sirens, rather than Homer, the bardic tradition incarnated in him, posterity, or any such construction, as those with the capacity to shape the narrative. Cassin therefore locates the novelty of this episode in the Sirens' status as speaking subjects, narrating the *Iliad* from their perspective, rather than adopting their traditional role of objects caught up in the classically masculine gaze of the *Odyssey*.

It is worth looking in slightly more detail at the way Cassin relates the same episode in a different setting. In a debate with Alain Badiou, she concentrates on

a key moment in [Parmenides's] Poem, when he is describing the existent [*l'étant*], to *ôn*, which is to say the subject of philosophy for ever more, the moment when, here we go, he *says it*. He picks up, he quotes the words used by Homer to describe Ulysses passing by the Sirens while tied to his mast. It is completely extraordinary. Ulysses has himself tied to the mast in order not to jump into the water, and drown, attracted by what the Sirens are going to say to him. What's more, what they tell him is *nothing*. They tell him: 'come here, Ulysses, the renowned one, honour of Achaea, we are going to tell you who you are' – even if he knows that full well... [...]. First of all, this is a crazy scene: you have the Sirens, you have sublime vases where we can see Ulysses, completely naked and tied to his mast, then we also see the rowers with their ears stuffed, rowing like beasts, then the Sirens, who in fact turn into birds, did you know?, throwing themselves into the sea and committing suicide. It is an extraordinary scene: [...], 'his feet are solidly fixed to the floor, and he is tied up, bound within the limit of powerful chains'.¹⁶ And these words are used to describe the abstraction of all abstractions, which is that of being: we have to admit this is crazy! (Badiou and Cassin, *Debate*, emphases original)

Cassin emphasizes the dynamics of attraction, she demystifies – even humanizes – the Sirens by laying out their strategy plainly. This strategy is composed partly of flattery (referring to Ulysses's previous great deeds and reputation), and partly of a promise of knowledge (Homer's poem reads: 'we know all things that come to pass upon the fruitful earth', Homer, *Odyssey*, 12.190). Despite the sexual undertones, we are therefore on epistemic terrain: Ulysses is after all a Greek, and the Sirens' appeal is to his desire for knowledge.¹⁷ The oral quality of this version of Cassin's account allows several of its elements to be better understood: first, in telling us that 'what they tell him is *nothing*', she demystifies the Sirens (theirs is no supernatural power, but just an everyday seduction technique), as well as underlining Ulysses's vanity in listening to such approaches. Second, she concentrates on the Sirens' frustration, on their reaction to being thwarted by Ulysses, namely of drowning themselves in the sea. Again, the episode is re-balanced to take seriously the presence of the feminine Sirens, as something more than a tempting Other, one that is heroically

avoided, patiently dominated by the traditional protagonist. Third, Cassin reminds us that this scene features palimpsestically in Parmenides's Poem in order to create a double valency: Ulysses/being on the one hand, Sirens/non-being on the other. The complex dynamics of the scene describe nothing other than 'the abstraction of all abstractions, which is that of being', and it is confirmed that we are some distance away from the emptied-out, disincarnated Greeks often discussed, for example by Heidegger. If this scene is used by Parmenides to militate for being over non-being, Cassin enjoins us to reconsider the dynamics of exclusion at work in the foundational episode of universalization that the Poem, read by Cassin as a post-Heideggerian thinker in a French context, represents. Her thought is ultimately that when beings are folded into the broader category of being, this enfolding risks becoming a suffocation, if we do not take care to preserve those aspects of being that are mobile and shifting, here represented by the sophisticated, feminine voices of the Sirens.

4. Seeing Helen in Every Woman

The second discussion of feminine voices to which we can turn, thus extending our understanding of the way Cassin steps beyond ontology, concerns Helen of Troy. In *Seeing Helen in Every Woman: from Homer to Lacan*, Cassin looks at the treatment of this figure across a multitude of works (including Euripides, Marlowe, Shakespeare). She notably explores Gorgias, the Sophist and author of a 'Treatise on Non-Being' which she presents as at once the logical consequence and overcoming of Parmenides, in terms of his 'Encomium of Helen', which Cassin presents as an early recognition of the potency of language. However, we can limit ourselves to the 20th-century French play *Protée* by Paul Claudel.¹⁸ It is with her discussion of this setting that the discursive rather than ontological status of Helen – and with it the move towards a sophistics associated with the feminine voice – is clearest.

In this play, the Spartan general in the campaign against Troy, Menelaus, is waylaid on his return to Greece by the sea-god Proteus. The sea-nymph Brindosier, seeking to escape Proteus, plans a subterfuge involving swapping her identity with that of Helen. Cassin picks up the tale:

Proteus is open to having Helen instead of Brindosier, and Menelaus to having Brindosier instead of Helen. They are interchangeable, given the purposes for which they are used. For, in any case, as Menelaus says: 'I am the master of all the Helens in the world', 'There is only one Helen for me', and even: 'Helen: there is no other woman in the world'. In Helen, the proper name [*nom propre*] becomes a common noun [*nom commun*]: 'Helen', like 'Marie' for domestic staff, allows them to be referred to with no risk of a mistake. 'Helen', the/a woman [*la/une femme*], allowing those like Menelaus to have them all (Cassin, *Voir Hélène* 135).

In this moment, Menelaus, uses the proper name Helen interchangeably to signify woman (indeed elsewhere Cassin plays on that name's possible Greek etymology as the one who is undecidably ravished and ravishing; accordingly women would not have individual identities as subjects, but be caught in a reversible economy of conquest).¹⁹ The economy of exchanging subservient women is of course unpleasant, even in when it is set in ancient Greece, and even when it comes to supernatural beings such as sea-nymphs. Cassin only implicitly aligns herself with feminist outrage, however rightful, instead preferring to concentrate on what she sees as a bigger prize: a complete analysis and deconstruction of the thought-system within which these exemplars of masculinity, and the Western tradition that holds them as examples, operates.

This thought-system operates on a principle of interchangeability where women are concerned, which is to say that a woman is seen as never being a fully singular individual, but instead a being whose main task is to provide echo-chambers for the supposed superior qualities of the masculine. In Cassin's words, 'a *pharmakon*, an *eidôlon*, Helen is, like a currency, the general equivalent of all women. Her voice is capable of modulating every name, she can make any sound she desires. She is equal to them all [*elle les vaut toutes*]. She is the/a woman [*la/une femme*]' (Cassin, *Voir Hélène* 146). Helen is currency in the sense of being current or valid in different circumstances, but also in the dehumanizing sense of being an object of exchange and consumption (including sexual consumption). Cassin's language becomes playful even as she makes this serious point: 'elle les vaut toutes' has the meaning of Helen having the same value as all women, but also of Helen being their match.²⁰ And she proceeds to capture the sense of Helen being at once an individual and the site of a generalizing, symbolic operation, with the composite, strictly speaking ungrammatical, double article 'the/a woman'. She is a woman, but also all women, everywoman, and Cassin's reading suggests that the stakes of dehumanization and mythologization are no less here than with other major figures of woman in Western thought, for instance Mary mother of Jesus or Elizabeth I, Virgin Queen of England.

Let us see how Cassin relates these discussions of Helen of Troy and symbolic womanhood or everywomanhood to that other Homeric episode, quoted by Parmenides as we saw, of Ulysses and the Sirens. It is notable that she refers to the *Odyssey*, a work whose proper name has become a common noun meaning quest, via a similar construction as 'the/an epic [*la/une épopée*]' and 'the/a myth' (Parmenides, *Sur la nature* 50). In her discussion of Helen, Cassin starts off by relating the Trojan horse story, focusing on a lesser-known aspect of it:

The Greeks have feigned their retreat. The Trojans bring the great horse abandoned on the shoreline inside the ramparts.

Helen, followed by her new husband Deiphobus, walks around the horse, a hollow trap within which the Greeks' best men are hiding. The latter have not heard or seen their wives in ten years. To the great stupefaction of

Homerologists everywhere, she imitates with her voice the voice of each of their spouses, she calls each man by his name, using this voice which, each time, is that of the man's wife. They want to rush out, Ulysses alone manages to hold them back. The torching and the massacre will begin the very same night (Cassin, *Voir Hélène* 96).

Similarly to the episode of the Sirens, Ulysses demonstrates his superiority to his men, and once again it is by resisting the temptation to follow alluring voices. Western man has developed another supposedly key characteristic. But Cassin's main interest is in Helen's miraculous performance of the men's wives' voices. In creating this scenario, which dramatically deprives the men, hidden within the horse, of sight and thus emphasizes the importance of their hearing, the Homeric tradition inscribes Helen's special, symbolic status right at the surface-level of the plot. And this status is what Cassin describes as being 'the/a woman': hers is a woman's voice, obviously, but also one able to mimic the voices of other women, the men's wives. It is not only other to the men because it is feminine, but offers a version of that otherness that we must imagine to be homely and alluring in equal measure, a bonded otherness, one simultaneously maintained and suppressed.

Cassin commentates:

From this I deduce, amongst other things, that femininity and voice are linked.

The sounds of the voice, that of the woman, and the proper name of the man: the sound of the voice speaking the proper name gives one desire, this is the essence of the spark [*élan*] between a man and a woman.

Helen's voice imitates those of all the other women. For each man, Helen is a voice that is valid for all women. Helen is the/a woman, insofar as a woman is a voice calling a man by his name (Cassin, *Voir Hélène* 96).

It is notable that Helen's thrown voice serves as the setting which envelopes a saying of the men's name (which latter is no neutral category, but the vehicle of their renown and reputation). This is a first point of convergence with Cassin's description of the song the Sirens directed towards Ulysses: 'renowned Odysseus, great glory of the Achæans'. Cassin is acutely aware of the dynamics of a situation in which these warriors' pride is flattered by hearing their names uttered by – what they believe is – the feminine voice that is dearest to them. But as we saw with the Sirens, Ulysses resists, and it is also for that reason that the tradition has him as a hero. Cassin's description of this aspect is important:

Against Helen-*logos*, defined by the power of her voice, the physics of sound, and by the magic of the proper name, which allows the signifier to stick to the reference, only Ulysses is able to resist. Ulysses is a hero not due to his valour, like Achilles, but due to his cunning (*mêtis*), he is the only one capable of holding firm when faced with this conjunction of woman-*logos* (the

sounds of the voice and the appeal of the proper name): Helen, the Sirens (Cassin, *Voir Hélène* 97).

The first point to note is that Helen not only represents ‘the/a woman’ here, but becomes the composite entity of ‘Helen-logos’. Hers is not just any discourse, but discourse itself, the episode of throwing her voice to seduce and to trick the soldiers inside the wooden horse stands for the seductive aims of all discourse. Second, Helen is also made into a composite with the Sirens (Cassin’s laconic expression ‘Helen, the Sirens’, is more readily understandable in the French). Despite or due to Cassin’s philological training, she violently compresses together these two Homeric episodes to create a concept of discourse intertwined with femininity, and representing an adversary not only to the character Ulysses, but also to the Parmenidean ontology with its resistance, or deafness, to all the aspects of language that surrounds.

5. Conclusion

The femininity that Cassin concentrates on in her discussion of Helen of Troy is not an ontological or essentialist one (and indeed she speaks of ‘the womanly side of ourselves’; Cassin, *Discours de réception*, 77). It is not a question of simply replacing masculine power structures with feminine ones, as this may well leave in place the principles of hierarchy and of exclusion. Instead, she puts forward a sophisticated femininity, one based in Helen’s case on thrown, fictitious voices. On one level it is absurd or unbelievable for Helen to intervene in a war by successfully imitating the voice of each warrior’s wife. But over and against this idea of the everywoman, it is possible to see Helen’s use of her voice as a disarming one, humanizing both her and the warlike men. We saw Cassin speaking of a composite model of femininity represented by ‘Helen, the Sirens’, and for their part, the Sirens are certainly humanized in Cassin’s demystifying – insider? – account of the way they sing to Ulysses (‘what they tell him is *nothing*’).²¹ The best way to be rid of a masculinist, combative model is of course simply not to engage with it, and instead to insist on the sophisticated power of voice and voice alone. Cassin’s work shows that such masculine models are not confined to Homeric warriors but have replicated themselves throughout the epistemic and institutional structures of Western thought: for instance Parmenides’s ontology, but also all ‘cogitation’ in the sense of that which propounds the unproblematic co-belonging of being and thinking. With her particular combination of precision and ambition, such are some of the traditions that Cassin’s thought helps us to unpick.

Notes

1. Throughout, translations from French are mine unless stated otherwise, and page references refer to the untranslated French editions. Elsewhere she quotes the verse as ‘the same is indeed both thinking and being’ (Parmenides, *Sur la nature* 79); and ‘for the

same is thinking as well as being' (Cassin, *Si Parménide* 66). She also quotes Heidegger's translation, which in English becomes: 'being, thinking, the same' (Cassin, *Sophistical Practice* 32). Gallop's English translation is as follows: 'the same thing is there for thinking and for being' (Parmenides, *Fragments* 57).

2. These works have not been translated – the translated titles are given for information only.

3. In the interview from which this statement is taken, she also comments interestingly: 'I'm not interested in those who are "rehabilitating sophistics" because rehabilitating sophistics consists in making Sophists into philosophers after all. They are welcomed back into the flock ("agrégés"! [...]) That type of rehabilitation, which merely reverses the Platonic judgement about the Sophists while maintaining his scale of values, doesn't interest me at all' (Cassin, *Sophistical Practice* 14).

4. Cassin's regular collaborator Souleymane Bachir Diagne discusses the (un) translatability of being and the *cogito* in various African languages (Diagne, 252-53).

5. The Poem opens with an unnamed 'I' relating a journey (Gallop identifies this narrator with Parmenides, but Cassin does not agree). He is carried in a chariot pulled by horses and driven by young girls who are 'Daughters of the sun' (Parmenides, *Fragments* 49). At a fast pace, with the spinning axles creating a flute-like music, he is taken on a divine path reserved for those who think ('the man who knows'; Parmenides, *Fragments* 49). He is carried to a gateway opening on to the diverging paths of day and night, which the girls' sweet words persuade the figure of Justice to open. He therefore finds himself in some celestial or cosmological space, and there encounters a benevolent goddess who takes him by the hand and tells him that he has been guided to this place by 'right and justice' (Parmenides, *Fragments* 53). This goddess proceeds to dispense a series of lessons about being and non-being.

6. Sedley points out the mention of a third path, 'a "backturning" one representing ordinary human acceptance of a variable world – the path of know-nothing "two-headed" mortals, who somehow manage to conflate being and not-being' (Sedley 114).

7. Cassin translates 'la nuit sans enseignement', night without teachings (Parmenides, *Sur la nature*, 91).

8. 'What is craziest is that no-one has ever noticed this. I think I am the first to have noticed it. Perhaps it has been noticed, but it has not been *said*' (Cassin, *Debate*). Badiou's evaluation is as follows: 'one of [Cassin's] most important gestures of thought, perhaps the most important, is to have placed Homer in the foreground of her interpretation and translation of Parmenides' (Badiou 33).

9. Parallel investigations to the present one could be carried out into Cassin's treatment of the Greek notion of appropriate discourse / speaking well as *hellenezein* (excluding non-Greeks); or into the first part of her *Aristote et le logos*, which is titled 'Speaking as a Man?'

10. I have mostly used the terms feminine/masculine rather than those of woman/man, though as the quotations taken from Cassin occasionally show, she does not necessarily seek to disassociate gender and sex.

11. 'We recognize the sons of Protestant ministers and school teachers in scholars by the naïve assurance with which they already assume that they have proven their case, when all they have really done is present it heartily and with fervour; they are thoroughly

accustomed to people believing them – it was part of their fathers’ ‘occupation’! A Jew, by contrast, in accordance with the business circles in which he moves and the past of his people, is least accustomed to people believing him. Observe Jewish scholars in this regard – they all place great emphasis on logic, that is, on compelling assent by offering reasons’ (Nietzsche 235). See the interview between Cassin and Feltham, American University of Paris, 21st June, 2022, in this issue of S.

12. For example, Badiou writes: ‘[being] is what, expressly, debar[s] all effects of language, and bears witness [...] to the birth of a thinking removed from the power of language, and in which we glimpse, implacable and identical to itself, a totally bare fragment of the real’ (Badiou 29).

13. ‘Sophistic doctrine, which is a historical reality, is at the same time artificially produced by philosophy. The essence of this artifact is simply to construct the sophist as the negative alter ego of the philosopher: his bad other’ (Cassin, *Sophistical Practice*, 29). One sense in which this is true is that the major portraits of Sophists we possess are found in the works of an author arguably committed to caricaturing them: Plato.

14. She says of *Avec le plus petit et le plus inapparent des corps* that ‘the stories came out of the same type of work on language and the same type of work on the dominant, orthodox, or again ontological, phenomenological tradition. It is exactly the same type of philosophical work’ (Cassin, *Sophistical Practice* 7). This passage illustrates her account of having wanted to publish the stories at the same time as *L’Effet sophistique* (1995), but having been prevented on the grounds of maintaining her scholarly reputation. *Avec le plus petit et le plus inapparent des corps* eventually appeared in 2007.

15. Such a position is at the opposite pole to Cassin’s characterization of Aristotle: ‘a terribly honest philosopher [...] never does writing present him with any advantage’; ‘Aristotle as the paradigm of the *phenomenologically correct*. [...] Correct [...] in the ease, which we can call ontological and sapiential, with which he says the world as it is’ (Cassin, *Aristote et le logos* 1, 4, emphasis original).

16. Here this verse differs slightly from the versions in the translations by Cassin and Gallop: ‘he remains fixed to the floor, for powerful necessity / holds him in the chains of the limit which encircles him completely’ (Parmenides, *Sur la nature* 87) / ‘[it] remains thus firmly in place ; for strong Necessity / Holds [it] fast in the chains of a limit, which fences it about’ (Parmenides, *Fragments* 69).

17. The title of Cassin’s work is drawn from Goethe’s *Faust*, in which a magic elixir allows he who drinks it to ‘see Helen in every woman’; Cassin also uses the phrase because it is picked up by Freud, for whom seeing Helen in every woman stands for the possibility of extracting significance from psychic phenomena that at first sight seem less promising.

18. ‘The knowledge the Sirens are taken to possess is presented as double-edged: they represent ‘the temptation to lose oneself in “all that can be born”, in the event, in becoming’. This works in an ambivalent way: ‘the Sirens’ song represents both the immortality of glory and the physical reality of death, of bones and rotting flesh’ (Cassin, *L’Effet sophistique* 39).

19. She quotes Æschylus for whom Helen is ‘Taker of ships, taker of men, taker / of cities (*helenas, helandros, heleptolis*)’ (Cassin, *Voir Hélène* 90).

20. Cassin uses the same play elsewhere: ‘Le chant des Sirènes vaut la *doxa*’ (Parmenides, *Sur la nature* 61), the Sirens’ song is a match for received opinion or ideology. Elsewhere Cassin writes, ‘Aristotle is *doxa* itself’ (Cassin, *Aristote et le logos*, p. 2)

21. Throughout *Seeing Helen in Every Woman*, Cassin dialogues with Lacan on the point of this nothingness – whether this be in terms of the Lacanian dicta that ‘la femme n’existe pas’, ‘there is no sexual relation’, or in terms of female *jouissance*.

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ALEXANDER STAGNELL

“ I WOULD PREFER NOT TO ”

Or - Who's Afraid of Hegel? Protagoras and Parrhêsia¹

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 Cassanian philosophy, neither does she offer us any rhetorical theory.² 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 [δόξαση] 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"³ – 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 Chaïm 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 equivocality 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 trente 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 *parrhêsiastic* 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 *parrhêsiastic* 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".⁴ 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).⁵ 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 hysteric, 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 understanding 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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BRUNO CARIGNANO

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 founds 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 transferential 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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COMPLICATING THE UNIVERSAL

The Lessons of Barbara Cassin's "Logology"

Complicating the universal is a formulation that appears in the subtitle of Barbara Cassin's book on translation.¹ It pointedly summarises the fundamental lessons that traverse her decades long work, and perhaps most notably her complicating relation to philosophy. Cassin's engagement is most known for her ongoing attempts to rehabilitate sophistry, to distinguish sophistry as an "historical fact" from its negative philosophical image. In this framework, the endeavour to "complicate the universal" can be read as a fundamental philosophical project, comprising a clear ethical and political stance, which must today necessarily accompany such problematic and disputed concept like the universal. "Complication" on the one hand affirms the universal and, on the other, acknowledges the necessity to undertake a rigorous critique of this classical philosophical notion – particularly in light of its ongoing feminist and anticolonial critique, which still lacks proper acknowledgement in the academic institution of philosophy.

Instead of rejecting the universal, Cassin thus speaks of its complication. This immediately suggests that the universal is not exclusively the realm of abstract neutrality, an ontological, epistemological and political register, in which all differences become pale or are simply abolished. To complicate the universal means that its abstraction is replaced by its inner conflictuality, but it also means that the universal is not something pregiven; it is a matter of invention. A truly complicated universal is structurally open – Lacan would say "not-all" –, unstable and processual. Aiming for a complication in the universal, or simply a complicated universal, must be distinguished from two other predominant contemporary attitudes toward universalism and the notion of the universal, the abolitionist and the affirmationist. The former stance denounces universalism as the ultimate expression of Eurocentrism and even a justification of European colonialism, thus calling for a thorough critique and ultimately the rejection of this problematic concept. The latter, in turn, continues to insist on the necessity of a universalistic outlook in the field of politics in order to construct a framework, in which emancipation will be possible beyond fragmentation of subjectivity in

the inconsistent multiplicity of particular interests, tendencies and identities. Both stances toward the universal are necessary, but the work of Barbara Cassin nevertheless seems to contain an additional turn of the screw.

In this conflicted situation, a complication of the universal first and foremost implies that we expose the dependency of the universal on language without therefore relativizing its efficacy. This is where a major problem comes in, the fragmentation of the field of language, the multiplicity of languages and finally their confusion. The field of language is incomplete, not-all, to put it again with Lacan, a field marked by semantic chaos, which sustains constant proliferation of misunderstandings and failed communication. Indeed, this field is marked by the confusion that is addressed in the old Biblical metaphor of the tower of Babylon (to which I will come toward the end). There is no One-Language, no universal and/or unifying language, in other words, no metalanguage, in which it would be possible to speak equally about other languages and, in doing so, totalise their field in a more or less unproblematic manner. Because no such totalisation is possible, this very impossibility suggests that there is no language of the universal, no language, in which an actual universal could be articulated.

Still, European philosophy has always reserved itself the right to speak the language of the universal, and more precisely, the language of the abstract universal, from which singularity was necessarily excluded, delegated onto the figure of the other: slave, woman, sophist, child, madman etc. Ever since her sharp and well-pointed criticism of the Aristotelian foundation of philosophy – as a discourse, which attributes to itself the ultimate right to construct the universal – Barbara Cassin never fails to remind one that the main ambition of European philosophy consisted of inventing a language, which will not only speak in behalf of all, but which will moreover be the language of being itself, a language of segregational universalism and divisive ontological univocity (grounded on the clear-cut distinction between being and non-being, hence on the rejection of negativity). It is no coincidence that in Aristotle's foundation of philosophical discourse, the entry point in science of being *qua* being, once the predecessors have been first acknowledged and then refuted, consists in a *coup de force*, in which a normalisation and disciplining of language takes place.² This presumably universal language, in which the essence of human being as a being of *logos* comes forward, is at the same time something like an immense prosopopoeia of being *qua* being – a language, in which being itself unveils itself in language.

But the language of ontology is grounded on a division, by means of which a figure of the other is constructed: the “other” language comes in the guise of incomprehensive babbling, verbal impenetrability and opacity, speaking for the sake of speaking (as Aristotle puts it in a famous passage of *Metaphysics*, the passage that Cassin translated as “speaking for the pleasure of speaking”). For the ancient Greeks, barbarians, these paradoxical speaking beings, which are no subjects of (Greek) *logos*, certainly speak some kind of language. The opacity of their language serves as living proof that their speech is introverted and detached from production

of meaning. It is this detachment that makes babbling the perfect negation of the universal language of being – a language of non-being. For Aristotle, these features of “barbaric” language are shared by the language of sophistry.

The problematic obtained a specific twist in the 20th century with the invention of psychoanalysis. The detachment of language from external reality and from the orientation through meaning exposes a linguistic singularity and a language of the singular, for which one can only conclude that “it” enjoys. There is no universal language of enjoyment. When Lacan, whose work resonates with Barbara Cassin’s critique of normative philosophies of language, and particularly of Aristotle, occasionally claimed, “there is enjoyment of being”, he implicitly declared being to be something like enjoyment of philosophy. In its discourse on being, philosophy overlooks its own embedding in discursive enjoyment. Perhaps no other philosopher exemplifies this link between being and enjoyment better than Heidegger, whose vehement poetisation of philosophical language certainly introduced a radical break with the predominance of Aristotelianism in philosophy of language. But the Heideggerian turn also unknowingly demonstrates that being itself stands for a peculiar, poetic surplus-product of linguistic action.

What would the attempt of complicating the universal then stand for in this situation in which language seems to be torn between the abstract and exclusivist universality of the language of being, and the concrete and corporeal singularity of the language of enjoyment? It would mean above all deconstructing and rejecting this very opposition. The assumption that there is, outside the true language of being, the linguistic perversion, the false language of enjoyment, is indeed the founding myth of logic. By rejecting this opposition, language appears internally redoubled, conflicted and self-opaque. According to Barbara Cassin, the practice of translation exemplifies this rejection. Cassin refers, among others, to an occasional remark by Lacan regarding metalanguage: “What does it mean, metalanguage, if not translation? One cannot speak of a language except in another language.”³ This remark may sound puzzling if we place it next to another Lacanian slogan: “There is no metalanguage.” Metalanguage is not a reality; it is marked by strong inexistence that Lacan marks with the expression *il n’y a pas*, “there is no”. Lacan makes only one further use of this strong inexistence, when he describes the ontological status of sexual relation. Here, too, *il n’y a pas* is mobilised in order to make the point that sexual relations are constituted on the background of a radical absence, inexistence or hole, and moreover, that these relations are economisations of a fundamental non-relation. The same point can be extended to the multiplicity of languages. They are embedded in a failed relation, or non-relation, and this non-relationality is exemplified through the fact that they need to be mediated by the labour of translation – which, as metalinguistic activity, accounts for the fact that there is no such thing as metalanguage. Translation is economisation of the radical inexistence of a metalanguage. For this reason, translation is an impossible, albeit necessary task, one that can never truly succeed working through the non-relation and the discrepancies between languages.⁴

On the other hand, one could equally say that there is only metalanguage as an ongoing activity, insofar as the practice of translation – as well as the weak inexistence, for which Lacan uses the conventional negation of the verb *exister* – concerns every language in particular. This means that every language virtually does not exist as a completely constituted field or object, an abstract universal, which would be concretised in a multiplicity of dialects. Moreover, within each particular language there is non- or misunderstanding, which requires the metalinguistic activity of translation. The inexistence of metalanguage is correlated to the inexistence of language.

In her focus on the Aristotelian rejection of sophistic speech and the consequences of this rejection throughout the history of European philosophy, Cassin seems to leave no doubt that her work concerns not simply language, but moreover the real of language. In this respect, Cassin indeed remains faithful to Lacan's preoccupation with the link between the signifier and enjoyment, hence with the productivity of language. In the psychoanalytic framework, the realisation of language can be brought down to two central products, the already mentioned enjoyment and the unconscious. Another way of grasping the real of language in a manner that challenges the traditional orientation of philosophies of language – the Aristotelian “decision of sense” – consists in highlighting its paradoxical mode of existence. To put it with Aristotle's own vocabulary, language is an activity, *energeia*, which does not amount to a result, *ergon*.⁵ With Lacan's insistence that “the big Other does not exist” in mind we can say that the activity of speech unfolds on the background of the inexistence of language. To complicate things further, Lacan adds that this inexistent big Other nevertheless has a body; its mode of existence entirely depends on the speaking body and the link between speaking bodies, the externalisation of speech and the social bond.

This link between corporeality and inexistence inevitably implies a critical distance from classical ontology, which – in accordance with Cassin's account of Aristotle's foundation of the “science of being” on a preceding normalisation of speech – rejected the ontological scandal of language from its own field. One could say that a more fundamental oblivion from the “oblivion of (the originary sense of) being” (as Heidegger would have put it) is at stake in the foundation of philosophical discourse: the oblivion of speaking. To put it bluntly, philosophers forget that they speak and, more specifically, they forget that the signifier affects their body – and that “thinking” is the result of this affection.⁶ It is this affective dimension of language that Aristotle ultimately rejected from the field of philosophy, and Cassin's constant returning to the problem of the “pleasure in speaking” (*plaisir de parler*) explicitly reintroduces the problematic surplus-product resulting from the activity of language in the living body, hence from the problematic nexus between the bodily and the symbolic.⁷

The “decision of sense”, by means of which Aristotle attempts to normalise language and reject the sophistic experience of speech, ultimately comes down to the restriction of the activity of speaking to apophantic speech – a speech, in

which the “unveiling of being” takes place, to put it again with Heidegger (the meaning of *apophainein* is “to show”, “to reveal”, “to make known”). As soon as we shift the perspective and observe language from its “marginal” phenomena, its productivity and performativity, ontology must be supplemented with what Cassin calls “logology”, whose main task is to account for the autonomy and the causality of language, as well as to conceive language as a specific type of disturbance or disequilibrium in the living body. Needless to add that at this point logology overtly intersects with psychoanalysis. Whereas for ontology language ultimately comes down to *organon*, a tool-organ of communication and representation of reality, one could argue that for logology language appears more like an “organism”, endowed with specific life, which exceeds the life of the speaking subject or a community of speaking beings.⁸

The quarrel between ontology and logology evolves around the question, whether language stands for equilibrium or disequilibrium. It was Plato who set the terrain for this dilemma by contrasting two forms of language, mathematics and poetry. According to Plato, the privilege of mathematics is that it does not deceive, whereas poetry not only deceives but, moreover, causes turbulent affective states, a loss of control and, precisely, the fusion of thinking, being and enjoyment (to frame the problem again from the Lacanian perspective). The deployment of speech in theatre is a case in point. The causing of affects moreover points beyond the function that in the past century was framed in terms of linguistic performativity; it pinpoints the materiality of the signifier. Plato believed that mathematics deals with eternal and thus unchangeable truths, sustaining true knowledge. Poetry, in turn, deals with wordplay, unstable and dynamic structures, and therefore sustains mere semblance of knowledge, the multiplicity of opinions. Hence, in the familiar Platonist scenario, poetry must eventually be excluded, banned from the ideal state, since it destabilises not only the social relations but, moreover, exposes a rather inconvenient ontological problem, the instability of being.⁹ It rejects Parmenides’ opposition between being and non-being and confirms Heraclitus’ notion of ontological movement, flux or becoming, in which being and non-being are precisely intertwined, or rather, where the dichotomy between being and non-being no longer makes sense.

The dispute concerning whether philosophy should orientate itself in accordance with formal or poetic language took the familiar twist in the 20th century. While analytic philosophy, pragmatism and communication theory established themselves as some kind of modern forms of Aristotelian normativism, Heidegger proposed an original, yet highly problematic, affirmation of poetic language. In his philosophy of language, Heidegger elaborated something like a linguistic nationalism, according to which German language stands for the modern language of being. Cassin’s work critically rejects both alternatives, abstract normativism (logic and grammar, Aristotle) and linguistic nationalism (Romanticism, Heidegger), showing that both positions are grounded in fetishisation of language, precisely as language of being. For the linguistic and logical normativism the language of being comes in

guise of an ideal language, which is first and foremost without any kind of surplus. As already stated, the Aristotelian name for this ideal language is apophantic *logos*, in which the unveiling of being takes place. Approached from this side, the main discursive problematic evolves around meaning and predication. Apophantic *logos* is a linguistic activity, which attributes or denies a predicate, feature or characteristic to a given object. The fundamental activity of *logos apophantikos* therefore consists in revealing or unveiling – a feature, which remains unaltered even in Heidegger's philosophy.

Nevertheless, Heidegger's linguistic nationalism significantly deviates from the logical vision of ideal language, since it ends up privileging one language in the multiplicity of languages, in which being is unveiled in a privileged manner. For Heidegger, Greek was the premodern and German the modern language of being. On the background of this fetishist determination, Heidegger understood the task of German philosophy and particularly his own role in the history of philosophy as a return to the Greek origins, in order to renew the lost authenticity in the relation between thinking, being and speaking. Mathematics and its modern embodiment in technology are furthest from this authenticity, thus radicalising the oblivion of being, which took place with Plato's move from being to the highest of beings, and more fundamental from his turn away from poetry toward mathematics.

Heidegger's move is profoundly premodern and at the same time reactionary: the return to the Pre-Socratic philosophers is a return to the hypothesis of the authentic language of being. It is also a return to a fictitious unique language before the confusion called "Babylon"; hence the proliferation of fake etymologies in Heidegger's poetic subversion of philosophy, which are supposed to reconstruct at least some fragments of the presumable originary language of ontology and restore bits and pieces of the forgotten authenticity of being. To repeat, while the logical-normivist fetishisation fabricates one ideal language in contrast to all actually existing languages, one language to regulate them all, the Heideggerian fetishisation decides one actually existing language against all other actually existing languages as *the* language of being. For the analytic tradition, there is no privileged language among languages, hence no linguistic nationalism, but there is metalanguage, in which it can be normatively spoken about all other languages: the ideal language of communication and information, in which the procedure of quantification sustains a stable relation between the signifier and being. It is this tendency to quantification that Heidegger most vehemently rejects in his critique of modern technology and mathematics.

Heidegger and the analytic tradition certainly could not be further apart, since the latter seeks for a language without surplus, whereas the former embraces poetic language, which is indeed a language of surplus. However, what unites both positions is that they display a certain resistance to the ontological scandal of language, and, in both cases, this scandal concerns the aspect of productivity of language that cannot be restricted to the question of being (whether unveiled or actively produced by means of linguistic performativity). Elizabeth Grosz once argued that

the European philosophy was characterised by a certain “somatophobia”,¹⁰ ever since Plato’s language game with the Greek *soma* (body) and *sema* (grave) defined the body as grave of the soul. With Barbara Cassin one could add that philosophy was plagued by another, no less problematic phobia, this time concerning language, “logophobia”, which motivated philosophy to reject the productive and destabilising aspects of language. The consequences of this “phobia” reach well into the present and sustain an unbridgeable gap and antagonism in philosophy. One merely needs to recall the resistance of analytic philosophy to all of the philosophical schools and orientations that reject the primacy of logic and dispute its role as “therapy of language”. At the same time, Heidegger’s scepticism toward formal languages, geometry and mathematics provides the flipside of this “phobic” attitude. It is also hardly surprising that “somatophobia” and “logophobia” are closely linked. The problematic that philosophy expelled out of its preoccupation with language concerns precisely its excessively corporeal consequences, which demonstrate that there is a fundamental deadlock and disequilibrium at stake in the speaking body.¹¹

At the other end of European metaphysics, Ferdinand de Saussure grounded the science of language on the distinction between language (*langue*) and speech (*parole*). With this move, Saussure in fact reproduced the classical ontological detachment of language from the speaking body and under the banner of “science of language” elaborated yet another metaphysical linguistics. Psychoanalysis seems to be one of the few intellectual inventions that strived to counteract the metaphysical leanings of the modern science of language. The fundamental objects and problems of psychoanalysis – the unconscious, sexuality, drive, to name just the obvious ones – are all phenomena of fusion between the symbolic and the corporeal, the material effects or bodily actualisations of the symbolic order. It comes as no surprise that in his later years Lacan introduced the notion of *lalangue* in order to mark the point where the psychoanalytic examination of the junction between the symbolic and the somatic decisively diverges from the epistemic (hence ultimately incorporeal) object of linguistics. Alluding to a specific speech impediment, stuttering, the concept of *lalangue* is meant to cover precisely the disfunctioning of language and its irregularities, while continuing to examine language in its autonomy, independently from the ideal of communication, transmission of information and representation of reality.

It is not that the father of structuralism did not take into account the autonomy of language. In his *Course in General Linguistics*, Saussure overtly remarks that language in general, and linguistic changes in particular, escape our conscious will.¹² There is, thus, an open acknowledgment of tension between the speaker’s intentionality or the intentionality of a community of speakers, on the one hand, and something that could well be called the intentionality of language, on the other. How do the changes in language take place then? Saussure in any case insists that individuals and generations, who for the most part unconsciously follow the rules of language, do not make these changes. Only a few speakers actually cognize the linguistic rules. What seems beyond doubt is that a major reason why a linguistic change

cannot be planned is linked with the arbitrariness of the sign, the loose and unstable relation between the signifier and its signified. Although this Saussurean idea has been criticised even by structuralists themselves,¹³ arbitrariness provides at least the kernel of the explanation as to why linguistic changes cannot be programmed and why they effectively take place on daily level, albeit in the guise of micro-changes and micro-inventions. The autonomy and discreteness of linguistic change is driven by the fact that we are dealing with an entire network of arbitrariness, a virtually endless and open system in constant motion. But the changes may not be easy to register since the over-complexity, consistency and organisation of the system also exercises constant resistance against change. Resistance is a key feature of the structure of language. Language is torn between stability and instability, and in this respect it can indeed be described as organised disequilibrium. Despite creating the impression that macroscopic changes or linguistic revolutions are practically impossible, language is nevertheless subjected to historicity, and this means to constant change, brought to the point in the looseness – precisely arbitrariness – in the relation between the signifier and the signified. In language everything flows and at the same time preserves its consistency. The life of language is thus a state of constant tension.¹⁴

More than any other philosopher to date, Cassin allows us to recognise in language an ontological scandal with which philosophy and linguistics continuously struggle. The crucial aspect of this problematic is reflected in the activity of speaking, in which the manifested autonomy and the productivity of language exceed the speaker's intentionality. When reflecting on the surplus at stake in human linguistic activity, Cassin reminds one of the ambiguity in the French *plus*, more and no more. Jacques Derrida pinpointed this ambiguity in the formula, *plus d'un langue*: "One never speaks one language" and "One never speaks more than one language".¹⁵ The activity of speaking continuously actualises both moments, so that speaking always means finding oneself in a dislocated position. In other words, to inhabit one linguistic universe always-already implies dealing with a redoubling in one and the same language. Moreover, it means dealing with an activity, in which the language one speaks, the mother tongue, is in the process of self-constitution and self-overcoming, emergence and disappearance, consistency and processuality. Again with Aristotle, language is *energeia* (activity) without *ergon* (result) – an activity, which cannot be compared with use of a pre-existing, ready-made linguistic tool, but rather stands for the perpetual economisation of the "weak" inexistence of language. Lacan's dictum "the Other does not exist" again enters the picture and lays the foundation for a negative ontology of language.

The activity of translation, understood as a metalinguistic activity, evolves around the same ontological issue. Translation is only possible because there is no metalanguage; more precisely, the labour of translation unfolds against the background of a radical, "strong" inexistence, not in order somehow to make this metalanguage emerge, but to take its inexistence as a means for relating distinct languages to one another. Moreover, the inexistence of a metalanguage implies that

there is something radically untranslatable between languages. Every translation leaves an untranslatable remainder, which expresses the irreducible difference between languages and, in the same move, makes translation an impossible activity that is inevitably marked with failure. This view of translation is central to Barbara Cassin's exceptional editorial project entitled *The Dictionary of Untranslatables*.

Emphasising the untranslatable may create the impression that another fetishisation of language might be lurking on the horizon. Cassin accentuates, however, that every language is placed in the impossible position of openness and closure, unbordering and border. Just as in the Lacanian framework, one could argue that the inexistence of language is the true driving force behind the activity of speech – the negativity that is always addressed and that brings the linguistic production forward – the untranslatable is for Cassin the actual driving force of translation. And, just like matter in ancient atomism, linguistic matter, too, is moved by a void. The untranslatable is thus not meant to designate the impenetrable core of meaning expressed in one language, but rather the condition of possibility of linguistic transmission. At this point, it is worth recalling that the German language possesses two expressions for translation, which are crucial for understanding the critical scope of the *Dictionary of Untranslatables* since they allow one to distinguish between two modes of translation: *dolmetschen* and *übersetzen*. The former merely searches for matching equivalents of a word in another language, whereas the latter must be understood in the stronger sense of *über-setzen*, dis-placement or transmission. The question, however, is what is being transmitted? *Dolmetschen* transmits meaning, whereas *übersetzen* transmits difference, the impossibility of integral translation, its constitutive inadequacy. This difference suggests that *übersetzen* actively contributes to the expansion and the life of language, it “contaminates” language with foreignness.

Taken as a whole, the project of *Dictionary of Untranslatables* comprises an important thesis on the nature of philosophy in general and on philosophical language in particular. For it is quite clear that the *Dictionary* transmits more than a mere collection of philosophical concepts; it shows that the entire practice of philosophy is grounded on linguistic equivocity. The fundamental concepts of philosophy are ultimately condensations of linguistic surplus and the means of its transmission. Here we confront anew the tension between the translatable and the untranslatable or, in the language of psychoanalysis, between meaning and enjoyment. Philosophy has always strived to tame linguistic peculiarities such as homophony, where sound and sense are fused together in an equivocal or polyphonic manner. By showing that the language of philosophy comprises an accumulation of equivocations, language games and homonymies, the *Dictionary of Untranslatables* creates the impression of being an “antiphilosophical” project. It is certainly a negation of the typical philosophical dictionary or encyclopaedia, which would be a project of the “university discourse”, a collection of concepts and notions, which presumably ground philosophy in a universal language of being. In turn, the untranslatables show the anchoring of philosophy in *lalangue*,

thus confronting it with something that the normative tendencies in philosophy systematically strived to repress, its own enjoyment of language.

The untranslatables are not only symptoms of the philosophical enjoyment of language. They are also “symptoms of difference between languages”,¹⁶ which confront philosophers with the imperative of working with this difference. This work, however, does not amount to the plain and simple acknowledgment of irreducible singularity of each particular language or its absolute closure for other languages. This would indeed amount to the fetishisation of untranslatable. Instead, translation as a form of work comprises the construction of a weak universal, or perhaps better, a discursive commons, which is not to be mistaken for construction of metalanguage. The discursive commons addressed throughout the project of *Dictionary of Untranslatables* is difference itself. By taking translation in the sense of *Übersetzung*, the *Dictionary* demonstrates that language is continuously touched by difference and in this way made to expand and transform itself. Translation unbordered language by exposing it to the foreignness of another language, but also to self-foreignness, since linguistic irregularities in one and the same language already imply a view on language from its “inner outside”, a constitutive split in the (native) speaker.

For the most part of its history, philosophy strived to avoid the problematic of *lalangue* and the anchoring of concept in equivocity, the instability and enjoyment of *logos*. Such a confrontation would inevitably face philosophy with the internal limit of its own discursive consistency and with the problematic status of its claim for abstract universalism. The limit of philosophy traditionally assumed the externalised form in the figure of the sophist, this negative mirror image of philosopher and the objectivation of linguistic surplus that philosophy struggles with in its own linguistic practice. While philosophers always understood their endeavour as a search for truth and knowledge for which they required the invention of a stable and normalised language, sophistry presumably relativized and questioned both truth and knowledge. While philosophers strived to stabilise language by means of logic and grammar (the self-proclaimed “medicine of language”), sophists mobilised the dynamic of language in rhetoric (the so-called “art of speaking”) and placed poetic figures such as metaphor and metonymy, condensation and displacement of sense and meaning, equivocity and language game at the core of their discursive practice. In doing so, the sophists implicitly confronted philosophy with the contrast between language of being and language of enjoyment as two aspects of one and the same linguistic “tool”. The practice of sophistry demonstrated that, contrary to what philosophy strived to reject, there is something like “enjoyment of being”.¹⁷

Inverting the view of language and putting its own dynamic – “life” – and the affectivity it causes in the speaking body – “enjoyment” – at the centre of philosophical investigations displaces the accent from the presumable logical and grammatical stability of language to the intricacies of linguistic confusion. However, this linguistic confusion implies a critical view of language that

importantly deviates from the normative gaze of ideal language. As Cassin notes: “Every language has its share of confusions, but these confusions are identified from another language, and even they only exist from this other point of view. It’s always from the outside that we see how things work at home, it’s outside our own territory that we become aware of it.”¹⁸ An example of such confusion is certainly homonymy and, even more so, homophony, equivocity or polyphony, which raises a different and indeed more pressing issue. The difference between homonymy – same word endowed with different meanings – and homophony – same sound endowed with different sense – is crucial here. It is only with homophony and equivocity that the materiality and affectivity of language enters the picture – not simply the materiality of writing, but more importantly the speaking body. In homophony, more is at stake than simple overlapping or condensation of meanings, semantic confusion. Here two equally important overlappings take place: on the one hand, between sound and sense, and on the other, between enjoyment and sense (what Lacan called *joui-sense*, enjoyed sense) whereby sound and enjoyment overtly imply the presence of a speaking body and incorporation of the signifier.

In its fusion of language and the body, homophony indicates a limit of linguistics whose scientific concerns cover merely the physiology of the speech apparatus and the cerebral localisation of linguistic activity but not the material causality of the signifier in the psychoanalytic and poetological sense of the term, where the main interest goes to the production of symbolically charged affects (again, enjoyment). Here again we come across the double character of language, its suspension between material bodily activity and virtually existing system. The latter is an incorporeal epistemic object, an idealisation, extracted from the activity of speech. By performing its epistemic separation of language from the body, linguistics ended up privileging the actualisation of the symbolic system in the present, language in its synchronic aspect, its “eternal now”.

Although homophony provides a more exemplary case of linguistic confusion from homonymy – because it concretises the materiality of the signifier – the “con-fusion” of language and the body, if I may make the pun, is elevated on the level of the concept in the paradigmatic homonymy shared by several languages. The English *tongue*, the French *tongue* or the Latin *lingua*, the Slavic *jezik* (and the list could be continued) are all variations of the same homonymy, where the word signifies the general faculty of speech and part of the physiological speech apparatus. Derrida is one among many who drew attention to this homonymy. However, in this context Derrida reminded one of the specificity of Hebrew, where the word *safah* is a homonymy of “language” and “lip”. In his discussion of the biblical myth of Babylon, Derrida remarks that the Babylonian confusion stands for a “multiplicity of lips and not tongues”¹⁹. The Biblical myth is supposed to explain the emergence of linguistic multiplicity, the non-understanding and difference between languages. Before the confusion of languages there was only one language and, in accordance with homonymy, one lip.²⁰ Or, taken in its absolute singularity, the lip becomes a mythical organ, implying the absence of mouth. There is nothing mythical about

one tongue; this is an anatomical fact, and perhaps it is the homonymy of language with tongue that amplifies the conviction that there was one language before languages, a language that presumably ceased to exist as a consequence of Divine punishment. Next to being a mythical organ, a single lip symbolises absence of language, as well as the impossibility of unity in the field of language: not only the impossible identity between languages, which would enable their transparent communicability, but also the impossible identity and oneness in one and the same language. As soon as there is one lip, there are necessarily two. Of course, the two lips make a speaking mouth, in which, according to Hegel's hilarious remark, the highest and the lowest are brought together: the articulation of speech, which is the main means for the expression and externalisation of spirit, and spitting or eating, where the mouth is reduced to its miserable and anything but sublime corporeality.²¹ Extending this Hegelian remark from tongue to language, one can add that, it, too unites, if not the highest and the lowest, then at least two opposites: communication and enjoyment, information and violence, truth and lie, unveiling of being and its performative production, *langue* and *lalangue*.

Lips point toward touch, which is an activity that establishes both link and difference. They are indeed the privileged figure of redoubling, unity and division. If the tongue is a metaphor of linguistic unity, lips are not simply a metaphor of linguistic duality, but rather an exemplification of internal redoubling that characterises language. Language is no longer one – this is where the myth of Babylon comes in – and not yet two – the language of being and language of enjoyment, communication and babbling do not stand for two distinct languages, but for internal confusion and discrepancy of on and the same language. Or better, language was never one and it will never be two.²²

The text in which Derrida engages in an extensive commentary on the myth of Babylon ventures a wordplay in its title: *Des tours de Babel* (Babylonian Towers) echoes *Détours de Babel* (Babylon's detours). Babylon is ultimately an empty place, to which one can never return to, one can merely circumvent it and, in doing so, produce it as a place, which moreover gives a topological consistency to the linguistic confusion or the organised disequilibrium that is language. Babylon is a hole, which presumably pierced the lip and, in so doing, created the speaking mouth. Further, Babylon, too, is a homonymy. One meaning covers the tower of Babylon as a mythical construction of unique language and as metaphor of understanding, communication and relationality between languages, a metaphor of union, linguistic unity and oneness, relation and social bond. Derrida's wordplay speaks of the tower of Babylon in plural, which is undoubtedly crucial. There is only multiplicity; each language is a figure of the absolute, impenetrable for others and itself gravitating around a point of impenetrability and untranslatability. This leads directly to the second meaning of Babylon. Here, the name stands for the actual mixing of languages and their mutual incomprehensibility – in opposition to the myth's assumption of the virtual existence of One-Language.

The incomprehensibility governs between languages and within each particular language. After all, this is what Freud named the unconscious.

So what, then, is the task of translation? What activity are we talking about? Clearly this activity not only takes place between different languages but also within one and the same language, and, further, it not only takes place between different speaking beings but also within one and the same subject. The subject is constituted around a point of non-understanding, self-incomprehensibility, self-opaqueness and self-foreignness. Translation would thus comprise an ethics of handling with this foreignness, the care for the foreignness in oneself and in the other. As Cassin insists, translation must not abolish difference but work with it – work it through in a manner that will be metamorphic both for language and for the subject. Translation is indeed something that comes close to analytic work, understood in the Freudian sense of working-through. Moreover, as a metalinguistic practice, translation stands for an activity in which languages are, so to speak, observed from the outside. However, this outside is not absolute (a metaposition), but rather an inner-outer, which binds and unbinds, connects and differentiates languages. It is thus a process, in which (self-)identity and (self-)difference of language is constituted. Babylon ultimately comes forward as a figure for the impossibility of a language to bring its constitution to term and, in so doing, to inscribe itself in the order of being.

A language is in discrepancy with itself, but the symptoms of this discrepancy, as Cassin points out, can be efficiently detected and described only when one looks at a language from the viewpoint of another language. These symptoms also expose the two-sidedness of translation. In the same move, translation exposes the affinity and the discrepancy between languages, their relation and non-relation, which are continuously at work in one and the same link between languages, as well as in one and the same language. It is this internally broken, non-relational relation that makes of translation an activity that contributes to the extension of language by inscribing deadlocks into it. At the same time, translation pushes for the invention of a linguistic common, as Derrida concluded in his own manner:

This co-deployment toward the whole is a reply because what it intends to attain is “the pure language [*die reine Sprache*],” or the pure tongue. What is intended, then, by this co-operation of languages and intentional aims is not transcendent to the language; it is not a reality that they besiege from all sides, like a tower that they are trying to surround. No, what they are aiming at intentionally, individually and together, in translation is the language itself as Babelian event, a language that is neither the universal language in the Leibnizian sense, nor a language that is the natural language that each still remains on its own; it is the being-language of the language, tongue or language as such, that unity without any self-identity that makes for the fact that there are plural *languages* and that they are *languages*.²³

It is this linguistic commonality that Barbara Cassin addresses in her idea of “complicated universal”. In the same move, she demonstrates that complicating the universal has concrete consequences for philosophy, since it obliges philosophers to complicate the form of language that they historically invented for themselves in order to speak in behalf of others. Complicating the universal then ultimately means complicating philosophy, throwing it out of its linguistic comfort zone. Leibniz’s project of universal language,²⁴ this fictitious language of encyclopaedic knowledge and of the modern university discourse, shares its abstract universalist aspirations with another, much more efficient and violent modern attempt in discursive unification, the “language of commodities”. In stark opposition to the epistemic and economic uniformity in the field of social and subjective relations, the construction of a complicated universal, understood as a discursive event and a work-process, means above all inventing a language of emancipation, which would affirm the shared space and the equally shared difference of languages and subjectivities. Inventing a language without identity. This language would clearly not be an abstract universal, by means of which all differences would be mastered, if not effectively abolished, or in which particular languages and subjectivities would find their ultimate harmony (again in accordance with the Leibnizian model). For complicating the universal means sustaining what Derrida pointedly calls “unity without any self-identity” – this is what the labour of translation, understood as transmission of deadlocks that the subject encounters in speaking (as well as other registers of praxis), exemplifies.

Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges the support of the Cluster of Excellence “Matters of Activity. Image Space Material” funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) under Germany’s Excellence Strategy – EXC 2025 – 390648296.

Notes

1. Barbara Cassin, *Éloge de la traduction. Complicquer l’universel* (Paris: Fayard, 2016).
2. See Barbara Cassin and Michel Narcy, *La décision du sens. Le livre Gamma de la Métaphysique d’Aristote, introduction, texte, traduction et commentaire* (Paris: Vrin, 1989).
3. Lacan, quoted in Cassin, *Éloge de la traduction*, *op. cit.*, p. 27.
4. To recall a wordplay that Freud briefly refers to in his book on *Jokes: traduttore-tradittore*, which determines translator’s activity as an act of treason, albeit an unintended one.
5. See Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Schriften zur Sprachphilosophie* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2002), p. 418.
6. For the link between thinking and affect, see Jacques Lacan, *Seminar, Book XVII, The Other Side of Psychoanalysis (1969-1970)* (New York: Norton, 2006), p. 150-151. Thought

and affect can, of course, be linked on the background of the Freudian concept of the unconscious, which stands precisely for the fusion of language and the body.

7. In his writing on the drive, Freud spoke of the nexus between the somatic and the psychic. The drive is “on the frontier between the mental and the somatic, as the psychical representative of the stimuli originating from within the organism and reaching the mind, as a measure of the demand made upon the mind for work in consequence of its connection with the body.” Sigmund Freud, “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes”, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 14 (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 122. From the Lacanian viewpoint, the psychic could be translated with the symbolic.

8. In its critical positioning vis-à-vis Aristotle, logology in its own way pursues the line that was initiated by structuralism, the first thorough epistemological break with the Aristotelian philosophy of language and the first systematic thematisation of the autonomy of the symbolic order.

9. Aristotle’s position toward poetic language was less “excessive”, but not against sophistry, which was for him the exemplification of an untenable position in thinking and speaking. It is because of the very existence of sophistry that a therapy of language is needed and a normative conception of language must be elaborated.

10. Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies. Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 5.

11. In *Seminar XX*, Lacan addresses the link between language and body in two animal metaphors. The first one concerns the spider’s web and its activity of weaving, which is supposed to exemplify the real coming into the symbolic. The second metaphor is the swarm, which is supposed to exemplify the activity of signifiers and the unstable and dynamic consistency of language (in difference to the more rigid figure of the signifier chain). The web and the swarm, a singular activity of the spider’s body and a collective activity of, say, a flock of birds or a bee swarm: we have here two models, a body weaving a structure and a structure that actively determines the behaviour of its elements (hence the common example of swarm as active matter). Lacan implicitly suggests that language, too, is active matter. The web and swarm moreover provide the examples for language and *lalangue*, or perhaps better, for what is mathematisable in language and what seems to escape mathematisation, but what can be, at least according to Lacan, geometrised by means of topology.

12. See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, pp. 72-74.

13. Émile Benveniste relativized Saussure’s notion of arbitrariness by reminding that in our daily use of language we, the speakers, almost compulsively associate every signifier to its strictly determined signified. The bond between the two components of linguistic sign is thus for him grounded in necessity rather than arbitrariness. Lacan, in turn, took the other direction and eventually suggested replacing the notion of arbitrariness with contingency. For him, arbitrariness was not going far enough in pinpointing the non-relational aspects of language.

14. Another aspect of the arbitrariness of language is brought to the point in linguistic actions such as poetry and other forms of literary language, in language games, in what Freud called the psychopathology of everyday life, in short, in the unconscious. All these are cases of linguistic revolution, albeit not in the sense of radical subversion of the

structural order existing in the present. Structure stands less for a rigid transcendental order than for a gradual process of becoming; it comprises both the spatial (“synchronic”) and the temporal (“diachronic”) extension.

15. Jacques Derrida, *Le monolinguisme de l'autre* (Paris: Galilée, 1996), p. 21. Another crucial remark, proposed by Derrida, which pretty much summarises the experience of speaking, goes as follows: “I have only one language/tongue, it is not mine.” Derrida, *Le monolinguisme*, *op. cit.*, p. 12. Needless to add that it is precisely this experience of linguistic expropriation that stands at the core of the psychoanalytic link between language, body and the unconscious.

16. Barbara Cassin, *Plus d'une langue* (Paris: Fayard, 2019), p. 23.

17. Jacques Lacan, *Seminar, Book XX, Encore* (New York: Norton, 1999), p. 70. Transl. modified.

18. Cassin, *Plus d'une langue*, *op. cit.*, p. 27-28.

19. Jacques Derrida, *Psyché. Inventions of the Other*, Vol. 1 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 205.

20. More on this homonymy in Michael Friedman, “Jenseits der (deutschen) Sprache. Eine mathematisch-hebräische Falte”, in: Michael Friedman and Angelika Seppi (eds.), *Martin Heidegger: Die Falte der Sprache* (Vienna: Turia + Kant Verlag, 2016), p. 194-195.

21. See G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 210-211, footnote. The actual passage, where Hegel discusses the mouth in terms of union of the highest with the lowest activity, is taken from his *Philosophy of Nature*.

22. However, both lips and tongue accurately point out the linguistic surplus, since they are very much the central organs of enjoyment. Language is an extended, fantomic or spectral symbolic body, indeed an unbordered body. It can only touch itself by overcoming its presumable unity or rather by producing unity as a retroactive fiction.

23. Derrida, *Psyché*, *op. cit.*, p. 221-222.

24. See G.W. Leibniz, *L'harmonie des langues* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), notably the introduction by Marc Crépon, pp. 9-34.

OLIVER FELTHAM

‘LYING IS A BLOODSPORT’¹: BARBARA CASSIN
AND THEATRICALITY

*A refusal of the One of the Universal, in favour of a complicity with pseudos
false-lie-fiction. Let's say charming false truths.*

Le Bonheur, sa dent douce à la mort, 13

I. Scene

Plato's triangle

In his dialogue called the *Republic*, Plato, through the mouthpiece of his fictionalized master, Socrates, lays out a blueprint for a bloated, luxurious yet just city-state called ‘Kallipolis’. In conceptualizing the structure of this just city-state – that is to say, its division of labour and its distribution into three classes – Plato sets up a relationship between the philosopher (and her avatars, the philosopher-king and the guardians) and what is thinkable in the field of politics. However, in building this relationship between philosophy and politics, it seems that Plato cannot avoid mediating it through a third term: a character, a rival, a danger to be excluded from the just city – the imitator (Bk10, 597c). The imitator is explicitly identified as the playwright and actor: someone who “wants to perform his poems in person” (Bk3, 398a). A few pages earlier Plato distinguishes three different modes of storytelling, narrative (in epic poems), imitation (in tragedy and comedy), and a mix of imitation and narrative (dithyrambic poems). Tragedy and comedy, making up theatre, are identified as pure imitation. Plato’s infamous ban on theatre, his expulsion of plays from his hypothetical just city, takes a particularly ritualistic turn: when the travelling player turns up at the gates of the city Plato writes: “If he came to our city wanting to perform his poems in person...We would pour myrrh over his head, garland him with woollen garlands, and send him on his way to another city” (Bk3, 398a). What is this if not the ancient rite of sacrificing the *scapegoat* – itself singled out by some specialists as the putative origin of tragedy,

one etymology of which is 'goat song'? The philosopher-king theatrically excludes 'theatricality' from his just city.

Hence instead of a dual relationship between philosophy and politics, Plato's *Republic* inaugurates a triangle within which we are still confined: the philosopher, the action of politics, and the risk of the imitator. The imitator as playwright is positioned as a rival to the philosopher in that she arrogates the role educating the guardians, the future governors of the city. The imitator threatens to corrupt the guardians by turning them into 'imitators of everything' rather than sticking to their function.

In Plato's *Gorgias* and the *Sophist* the imitator is identified as not only the actor or playwright but also as the sophist, an actual historical rival of the philosopher in Athens in the business of education. In the *Sophist* Plato, without any detailed argument, identifies the sophist as an imitator. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates tries to pin down Gorgias in his distribution of proper arts (*technē*) within the city. Gorgias retorts that rhetoric is the art of arts, securing success via persuasion in all of the arts. Socrates claims that the sophist peddles false knowledge since the sophist professes to know everything and yet it is impossible for anyone to know everything: here we rejoin the imitator as 'jack of all trades' in the *Republic*. The sophist is shown to proffer spoken-images rather than ideas. In Book 10 of *The Republic*, Plato revisits and reiterates his argument for the expulsion of the poets and tragedians from the ideal city. This time he makes use of an ontological argument, distributing three levels of being according to their degree of stability, self-identity over time, and hence knowability: the Ideas, the sensible copies of those ideas, and simulacra or images, degraded copies of those copies. Both the tragedian and the sophist are impostors because they sell simulacra, false images of wisdom, simulacra – or spoken-images – whose being is unstable; that is to say, whose self-identity over time is highly vulnerable (Bk 10, 598c-d).

Plato's inaugural triangle hence comes in three different variations. In Book 4 of the *Republic* it is articulated as philosophy-politics-theatre. In the *Gorgias* and the *Sophist*, it is articulated as philosopher-politics-sophist. In Book 10 of the *Republic* Plato has recourse to ontology to develop a version of this triangle that classifies sophistic and theatre under the catch-all term of imitation, or unstable simulacra, spoken-images: philosophy-theatre-simulacra. Through this ontological argument, the fate of sophistic and theatre are bound together within the articulation of philosophy and politics.

Barbara Cassin's Project

As outlined in *L'effet sophistique*, Cassin's project is not merely to rehabilitate the sophists from their dismissal and disqualification at the hands of Plato and Aristotle. Nor does she set out to recuperate them for some modern philosophical viewpoint as liberals, democrats, pluralists or pragmatists *avant la lettre* (ES, 23-

25). Her project is to unleash the sophist's discourse beyond its philosophical fabrication and misconstrual. She does this not only through painstaking critique and undoing of the very arguments used by Plato and Aristotle to exclude the sophists, but more powerfully through close readings of the sophist's own texts, however fragmentary, and of the doxographic mentions and caricatures of their work. Hence she seeks to capture sophistry's own agency in its two classic periods: the first Greek sophistic, and the second Roman sophistic. That agency takes form through sophistic's shaping of philosophy's projects; sophistic's diagnosis of philosophy's historical self-misunderstanding; and sophistic's categorization and dismissal of philosophy in turn.

In the introduction to one of her earliest and longest works, *L'effet sophistique*, Cassin explains her project in the following way;

To attempt to understand sophistry, at the very least, beyond the oppositions between philosophy and rhetoric, sense and nonsense, one must accept its discursive performances as shrewd positions taken against ontology: sophistry as evading metaphysics and as alternative to the classic line of philosophy. (ES, 12)

In short, Cassin diagnoses the existence of a double 'sophistic effect'. That is, what has historically been understood as sophistry, is nothing but an 'effect' of philosophy's own discursive performances; however, and here's the twist, this artefact, this 'alter-ego' of philosophy turns out to have its productive effect on philosophy, and on its limits: indeed Cassin goes so far as to entitle a chapter "ontology as a sophistic masterwork".

Cassin makes wide-sweeping claims about the history of philosophy, drawing a quick line between Aristotle's exclusion of sophistic in Book Gamma of the *Metaphysics* and Habermas and Apel's delimitation of the transcendental rules of language games.² She explicitly assumes this project in the following terms: "to rewrite the history of philosophy under the influence of sophistry", and qualifies it by stating sophistic's "history of delimiting philosophy has as its epicenter the problem of the regulation of language" (ES, 16).³ At times the grand ambition of this project is expressed in hyperbole:

Gorgias' critique of Parmenides can only be adequately grasped, in my eyes, from the standpoint of logic or discursivity. Such an approach does not fall into non-philosophy, far from it. On the contrary, I believe that this will confront us with such a position so strong with regard to ontology or metaphysics in general, that it could well turn out to be philosophically uncircumventable. (ES, 26)

To attain an 'uncircumventable position' for Gorgias: what could be more philosophical than such a claim's argumentative ambition? Is this not precisely philosophy as the discourse of the master in Lacan's terms? Is this not just one more recuperation of sophistry on the part philosophy? The answer to these three

objections is no. The very concept of recuperation, indeed the whole dialectic of self and other, of misrecognition, projection, and introjection, of master and hysteric is too simplistic for what plays out between sophistry and philosophy as seen through Cassin's work.

In a gesture reminiscent of Derrida's coinage of 'grammatology' or 'deconstruction', Cassin baptizes her own discourse, 'logology'. She writes:

I propose to name this perception of ontology as a discourse, this insistence on the autonomous performativity of language and on the world-effect it produces, *logology*, from a term borrowed from Novalis. (ES, 13)

Such is Cassin's project in outline. Let us stage an encounter between this project and Plato's inaugural triangulation of philosophy, politics and simulacra.

The Hypothesis

If, in Plato's triangle, there is an original amalgamation of the tragedian and the sophist – two of philosophy's greatest rivals – under the heading of 'simulacra', any massive rearticulation of the nature of sophistic, and hence of the relationship between the philosopher and the sophist, will also have consequences for how philosophy understands theatricality. My working hypothesis is that a new comprehension of the sophistic entails a new comprehension of theatricality.

Two methodological challenges immediately raise their ugly heads. First, logically speaking, it does not follow that Cassin's unleashing of the sophists entails a different thinking of theatre. It could be the case that Plato got the sophists wrong, but at the same time got theatre right: the sophists do not proffer simulacra, but tragedians do, and the place of theatricality in relation to politics does not need to be rethought. Or, it could be the case that both sophistic and theatre have a constitutive relationship to what we call 'politics', but the rethinking of sophistic and its relation to politics has no implications for the contemporary rethinking of theatre and its relation to politics, however the latter might take place. In short, there does not have to be any symmetry between sophistry and theatre's relationships to the philosophy-politics couple.

The second objection is that Cassin does not take theatre and theatricality as a direct object in her work. There are many references to Sophocles and a close reading of Euripides' play on Helen of Troy/Sparta in *L'effet sophistique* (ES, 84-98), but these references and this reading are offered as corroborations of themes treated by the sophists. Theatre *per se*, theatricality, tragedy, comedy, particular playwrights – evidently none of these form Cassin's object. Nor does Cassin mention theatre itself as an object for the sophists.

Faced with these objections a wily researcher, calculating the cost-benefit ratio of pages read to working hours spent writing a citation-producing high-impact

journal article, would cut his losses and run, run far away. But this coyote is not so wily, and like a coyote with a bone, I couldn't give up, or like a coyote hunting, there was a trail of traces to follow. In Cassin's unleashing of the sophists beyond philosophy's misconstrual of their action, she again and again employs theatrical motifs, to the point that it is tempting to speculate that there is no avoiding a passage via theatricality in any reconfiguration of the relationship between the sophist and the philosopher.

What then are these repeated theatrical motifs? The first is her continual recourse to Freud's term of 'primal scene' when she restages the combats between philosophers and the sophists, whether it is that between Gorgias and Parmenides, Aristotle and unnamed sophist adversaries, or Gorgias and all detractors of Helen.

The second theatrical motif – after Aristotle via Arendt, Austin and Desmond Tutu on the performative as generative of consensus – is that of the *polis*, the city-state, as a grand theatre. Cassin's investigation of the effects of a certain kind of speech within and on the polis cannot be disentangled from Aristotle's positioning of tragedy in the *Poetics* as a cathartic experience that rearticulated the affective orientation of the people. The third theatrical motif – and as we progress in our investigation we will find how just how labile any typology becomes in Cassin's work – is that of words as bodies, words that do things, sometimes unpredictable things, precisely because they are material bodies, sounds that come out of certain people's mouths and land in certain people's ears, before they are interpreted.

The enquiry into theatricality via these primal scenes, the performative, and via words as material bodies leads to a series of speculative theses on the nature of theatricality. These theses concern conflict, the 'who?' as an open question, depth, voiced words, and the suspense of the moment. Since these theses emerge from an investigation of a contemporary re-positioning of the sophists, they might find a contemporary resonance in the worlds of theatre and performance, and they might make a difference to not only how we comprehend and classify theatre, but also how we direct and design it. Whether this is the case, however, is a matter for another enquiry, running them through encounters with contemporary theatre.

II. Restaging the Primal Scenes

Cassin restages three primal scenes in which the sophist combats the philosopher: The first pits Parmenides' *Poem*, and his 'crisis', against Gorgias' parody of that poem in his *Treatise of non-being*. The second – which Cassin herself names 'la scène originaire' – is Aristotle's decision of meaning in Book Gamma of the *Metaphysics* in which he confronts and dismisses those who would refuse the principle of contradiction (AL,12). The third primal scene occurs through Cassin's reading of Gorgias "Praise of Helen".

a. *Parmenides poem versus Gorgias' Treatise of non-being* (ES, 23-65)

Parmenides' poem ventriloquizes a goddess who sets up a *krisis*, that is to say, a foundational choice for the listener, or reader, between two 'ways', two orientations of thought, the first that of being, persuasion and truth, and the second that of non-being. The goddess declares that the second way is impracticable, deceptive, unknowable. the poem. Subsequently sets out three theses that inaugurate the entire tradition of ontology: there is being because being is, and non-being is not; being is essentially knowable, because being and thinking are one and the same; and that knowledge is transmissible (ES, 27-8).

Gorgias' treatise is entitled "On non-being or on nature". It sets out three theses: "nothing is"; "if it is, it is unknowable"; and, "if it is, and it is knowable, it cannot be communicated to others" (ES, 27-8). Not only are these declarations directly antithetical to those of the poem, but they are linked together by what Freud called 'kettle logic' (ES, 27). Cassin shows how Gorgias' demonstrates that what Parmenides calls 'being' is a reification of the verb 'to be', at the same time as the result of the assignation of a subject – 'there is', '*il y a*', '*il est être*' – to the abstract verb 'to be'. In short, Gorgias shows that ontology depends on a syntactical trick, and is thus a form of sophistics (ES, 28,43). In short, and this is a thesis Cassin takes from Gorgias and repeats throughout her work "being is an effect of saying" (ES, 40).

So in Gorgias and then Cassin's hands, what we have is a clash between two discursive performances – the poem and the treatise on non-being – which is at the same time a clash between two voices – Parmenides and Gorgias. There is no simple reconciliation between these discourses. One of them not only chooses and follows a path forbidden by the other, but also goes so far as to refuse the very framework of an either/or choice between these two ways. Cassin claims at one point that Gorgias' *Treatise* is a parody of the poem. To go even further, if in Plato's the *Sophist* the protagonist the 'Stranger' confesses that in critiquing Parmenides he is committing parricide, then Gorgias is also committing parricide, since his very discourse would not exist if it were not for Parmenides' original generative discourse.

In this encounter two, three or four actions occur: the declaration of an unavoidable choice, the prohibition of one route and guidance towards the other; the refusal of the choice or the rebellious decision to take the 'wrong route' and the denunciation of the sleight of hand employed in setting up this so-called choice. Two different voices affront each other in an asymmetrical encounter. Consequences are expected of these choices – whose warning, whose orientation will turn out to be practicable? Actions, an encounter of voices, expectation of consequences: this is a scene. It is a primal scene because it occurs around one of the primordial texts in the Mediterranean philosophical tradition and because the scene is repeated – knowingly or unknowingly – throughout that entire tradition up till and through today.

There is one evident theatrical motif to be retained from Cassin's restaging of this scene, and it is that of *conflict*, irresolvable conflict, 'meta-conflict' over the very stakes of the conflict, over the very names of the sides involved in the conflict: the way of being vs the way of non-being, or sophist-logologist vs philosopher-sophist-in-denial?⁴ On this basis one can extrapolate a thesis on theatricality, a thesis that names one of the necessary but not sufficient conditions of theatricality:

THESIS 1: Theatricality is a configuration of appearance that occurs when there is a conflict-vortex.

A conflict-vortex is all-swallowing fight or combat with the following characteristics:

- The number of sides or forces involved cannot be reduced to a dualism such as 'good' versus 'evil' because either there are clearly more than two sides combatting each other, and/or the very identity of the sides or forces is not stable or consistent (for instance, through the undoing and resoldering of alliances).
- Second, the conflict cannot be circumvented in that no-one has the power to remain in a neutral position or avoid taking a side (think of Tiresias who, despite his efforts, is turned into Oedipus' enemy just by interpreting a prophecy).
- Third, the conflict is unending in that it is not subtended, for any of the combatants, by a goal or an end that could determine a strategy which might succeed or fail within a specific timeframe. There is no sovereign discourse, no ethics nor political science which could assign an unequivocal value or objective of peace which could be employed to bring a recognizable end to the conflict. Consequently, for each side, the conflict is fought out via tactics without strategy.

This idea of a conflict-vortex is developed in different manners in the two other primal scenes, but it also occurs in Cassin's reading of Antiphon's *Tetralogies* and his text *On the Truth* which concerns the law and its relation to natural processes of vengeance.

In *On the Truth* the law never possesses the value of an endpoint. On the contrary, it is never anything other than one more process, following the natural economy, itself unstoppable. The law, or more precisely what is "just according to the law" is incapable of "providing assistance" to those who respect it. First of all it intervenes too late: the act has been accomplished, suffering has occurred, the damage is irreparable...Then, at the moment in which it actually intervenes via punishment, the appropriateness of its intervention is not guaranteed in any manner. Indeed, it is exclusively an effect of persuasion. (ES, 184-5)

In other words, no legal procedure or just trial could ever occur which would put an end to the conflict between the perpetrator and victim. Indeed in Antiphon's texts, those very terms – perpetrator and victim – turn out to be interchangeable. The domain of the law, of institutions, of conventions and procedures, turns out to be relatively impotent when it comes to constraining, preventing, channelling or reducing the domain of nature, of the passions, of the appetites and of vengeance. Even if the legal institutions do their work and bring their procedures to their proper end, those procedures are recovered and reinterpreted in natural terms, in the terms of desire, interest, appetite and vengeance. In this manner, in Antiphon's text, there is no legal end to conflict, but rather cycles of natural violence under one name or another. Through Cassin's interpretation, these natural cycles may be linked, quite elliptically to practices of 'returning to the sender' that occur in a primary school playground: 'Stupid!' – 'I know you are but what am I?'. Another playground confusion of use and mention instituting a bad infinity of auto-citational annoyance is the wonderful French refrain '*Je connais une chanson qui énerve les gens: Je connais une chanson qui énerve les gens: ...*'.⁵

b. Aristotle's decision of sense (ES, 55-58)

At the beginning of chapter 4 of Book Gamma of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle undertakes a demonstration of the principle of contradiction. Since he stipulates that it is a first principle of this new 'first philosophy' or discourse on being that he is developing, it cannot be demonstrated: indeed, it is required for any demonstration to work (AL,12). However, what he can do is dialectically refute those adversaries who pretend to refuse this principle or not to admit it. These adversaries would hence to be those who maintain that the same thing can both be and not be. The condition of success of Aristotle's refutation, however, depends not on Aristotle, but on the adversaries: they must start the game, they must simply 'say something' (1006a12). So here we have a trap laid by the philosopher, a trap for a very strange kind of interlocutor – at least in the philosopher's eyes – one who affirms that the same thing is and is not. If the interlocutor refuses to fall into this trap – that is, in the philosopher's eyes, by 'saying nothing' – then s/he is strange to the point of no longer qualifying as human, and being 'similar to a plant'. I cite Aristotle:

If he doesn't say anything, it is absurd to try to respond to someone who speaks of nothing, given that in such a manner he is not making any statements; for such man, inasmuch as he is a man, is similar to a plant. (1006a12-15)

But just how strange is such an interlocutor? Take phenomena or events that, in discussion between two interlocutors, turn out to be equivocal or ambiguous or difficult to categorize. Within the discussion those phenomena or events, due to their ambivalence, at the same time both are and are not whatever predicates or properties one might want to assign to them. Anybody who has been in love for a long time has learnt to negotiate this kind of contradiction at all levels of

the relationship. Things both being and not-being something is actually quite an ordinary experience. So, in return, just how strange is that character, the philosopher, who insists that someone who not only refuses the principle of contradiction but also refuses his trap, is similar to a plant?

It is a trap to agree to simply 'say something' because Aristotle has already set up a series of equivalences: to speak is always to say something; to say something is to mean something; and, to mean something is to signify something unique and identical for oneself and for another (ES, 56). Aristotle says it is impossible to directly demonstrate the principle of contradiction. One reason for this is that all demonstrations presuppose the principle of contradiction, so such an approach would beg the question. However, in this dialectical refutation of the sophist, Aristotle's series of equivalences, that is, his interpretation of the action of speaking, of saying, explicitly uses the principle of contradiction: to mean something is to signify something unique and the same for oneself and for another, that is to say, with no ambiguities. This is how the trap works: as soon as the interlocutor says something, in Aristotle's eyes she or he has already admitted the principle of contradiction because of the very nature of saying something. But is no other interpretation possible of the action of speaking? Cassin suggests that the sophists, their avatars and her discourse of logology open up just such an alternative interpretation of speech. If such an understanding does exist, and it is coherent, then *who* are these brave interlocutors who refuse Aristotle's trap? *Who* are these people who speak and say, without saying just one thing, or meaning just one thing which would be the same for you and me? Who are these people who speak in homonymies?

Aristotle's dialectical refutation holds open the possibility that the interlocutor refuses the first step of the refutation, and therefore 'says nothing' – if so, he equates them with plants. This is a negative gesture that outlines another place, a place in which people do speak and say because otherwise they could not even refuse the principle of contradiction. Yet these people speak in a manner that is very difficult to recognize for Aristotle, to the point that they can no longer be qualified as humans. Cassin's text carries out a positive gesture, outlining the coherency and stability of this other place. Hence when Cassin restages this primal scene what she creates is *depth*: this is the motif to be retained. Depth in that one of the speaking characters, one of the parties in this encounter, or missed encounter, comes from somewhere a long way away, somewhere quite different, somewhere with its own history, somewhere yet to be explored and understood.

Cassin has her own term for a negative gesture which outlines another place: *to barbarize*. She draws this term from the sophist Antiphon of Rhamnunte, and it means to relegate the other to the condition of being less than human, a barbarian, lacking either in the correct nature (the ethnocentrism or racism at stake in Pericles' Funeral Speech of Pericles, Plato's *Menexene*) or lacking access to the *polis* (Isocrates). To barbarize is to not recognize the other as belonging to a *polis*, or to misrecognize the other as not belonging to a *polis*, at the same time as asserting

one's own proper belonging to a *polis*. If there is a corresponding positive gesture on the part of the other outlining this alternative space from which they speak, then we have an appearance of *depth*.

The motif of depth allows us to add to the thesis on theatricality as involving a conflict-vortex. The fourth characteristic of such a vortex is that the conflict is unstoppable in that no middle ground can be found between voices or characters from different depths; that is to say, characters who appear as originating, as coming from, entirely different hinterlands. Given a plurality of characters in a conflict-vortex, these are the depths that render impossible philosophy's task faced with the *polis* – at least since Plato according to Rancière – and that is the task of constructing a stable distribution of roles, of social classes or types, and of goods, within one homogeneous space.

c. Gorgias' Praise of Helen (ES, 66-98)

The third primal scene occurs not so much in Cassin's text, between philosopher and sophist, or philosopher and 'plant', but in one of Gorgias' famous texts *Encomium of Helen*. This scene occurs between Gorgias and the detractors and admirers of Helen, and it is pragmatically addressed to us, readers and listeners: are we in turn admirers or detractors of Helen? Would we have embarked on one of those thousand ships? Even worse, is there one true Helen behind all the portraits of her, one that, once she is finally found, or won, would validate or disappoint our decision?

Already in Homer's *Odyssey*, with a supposedly dutiful Helen returned to Menelaus, whom Telemachus is visiting to ask of news of his long-absent father, Helen's nature is ambiguous. She pours a drug into their wine to "quiet all pain and strife" before they reminisce and recall her own ambiguous deeds during the Trojan war: she tells of how she alone guessed Odysseus' identity when he snuck into Troy disguised as a beggar – and he told her of the Greek plans – yet she kept that secret from her hosts, the Trojans, because "already my heart was turned to go back to my home", regretting bitterly that Aphrodite had blinded her when she chose to flee with Paris (IV, 261). Then Menelaus answers her with another story – and remark what an astonishingly forgiving or rather *drugged* husband he must be – when he grants that Helen must have been "bidden by some God", when she went around the Trojan horse three times calling out the names of the Greek soldiers inside, whilst ventriloquizing the voice of their wives, tempting them to reveal themselves. But for the steadfastness and determination of Odysseus at least two of them would have leapt out of the horse in broad daylight. Helen is thus ambiguous in Homer's portrait in that she betrays both sides as Cassin remarks (ES, 77). She is a kind of double agent.

In Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen* he sets out three possible interpretations of her action. She left Menelaus either by the intentions of destiny, the will of the Gods and the decrees of necessity; or because she was forcibly abducted, or because she

was persuaded by speech (§6, ES, 143). Later he adds a fourth hypothesis, she did it all out of love (§15). Gorgias then shows for each of these hypotheses, for each of these accusations, she is innocent, even that of love, in which he argues she was the victim of her own eyes (§19, ES, 147-8).

In Cassin's reading, which she bolsters with references to many other ancient texts that take up the question of Helen, it is not just a question of which of these hypotheses is true, or of whether Helen is guilty or innocent. Cassin shows that in the myth of Helen and her duplicity, there is not one argument that is not duplicated by its contrary (ES, 76). Indeed she goes so far as to claim that Gorgias shows that Helen's innocence is her guilt. In the end the *Encomium of Helen* "practices sophistic discursivity" in that "Helen is what is said of her", Helen is "Helen", an effect of saying (ES, 75). In the closest and longest reading of a play I have found in Cassin's oeuvre, that of Euripides' play *Helen*, she shows at length how Helen is an effect of having been called 'Helen'. In a burst of theatrical enthusiasm Cassin lists all the different versions of Helen that "I would like to, at least on paper, stage ... amplifying the philosophical vector, then amplifying the sophistic vector".⁶ But how does *Encomium of Helen* stage a primal scene?

Cassin cites an imperative from Goethe's *Faust*, "See Helen in every woman" (verse 2603-4), and she shows that what is at stake in Helen is the question around which Freud's theoretical machinery stalled at the end of his career, and the entirety of Lacan's famous seminar *Encore* is organized: what does a woman want? Or how can a woman's desire be discerned amongst a net of competing male desires? Gorgias' *Encomium* presents a primal scene by opening up an interminable question.

This is what leads us to another theatrical motif, the basis for another thesis on theatricality: the 'who' as open question. In Gorgias' text Helen's identity is opened up as an enigmatic question or enquiry that goes beyond any designation of *what* social roles Helen may adopt. This is a question that cannot be answered by a social role or a type of personality, nor even by a simple listing of all the actions that the character supposedly carried out. Gorgias forces the admirers and the detractors of Helen onto a neverending road, asking themselves without respite, faced with all the episodes and tales and perspectives and actions attached to her name, repeating to themselves the unanswerable refrain: 'Who is Helen?'

What are the stakes of this theatrical motif of 'who' as an open question? Through careful philological and conceptual analysis, Cassin shows again and again that each of philosophy's apparently decisive victories over the sophists – in Plato's *Theatetus*, the *Sophist*, the *Gorgias*, *Protagoras* and the *Sophist*, in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and his *Sophistical Refutations* – that each of them was a false victory, involving fallacies or sleights of hand, or misconstruals of the sophistic position. Cassin also identifies avatar after avatar of these misconstruals, not only in the scholarly commentary around the sophistic texts, but also in Heidegger and Habermas. But then if what is at stake is a philosophical project or task – for Cassin is without a doubt also a philosopher – of simply undoing this misconstrual then

what we are involved in is none other than a comedy of misrecognition, a little like *Twelfth Night*. But then how could a philosopher even hear a sophist's claim 'this has all been a misunderstanding'? In other words, how could this comedy end? The obstacles to a happy unveiling seem insurmountable. Philosophy conceives the sophist *precisely* as the one who wears a mask, who hides bad intentions behind that mask. What better mask to hide behind than the claim 'this has all been a case of misrecognition?' In trying to escape philosophy's misconstrual of the sophist, is it thus even the right question to ask 'who lies behind the mask?' Perhaps we could respond that we do still possess direct access to the sophists' writings so we know who they are, beyond the caricatures of philosophy, in that we know what they have to say. But if Gorgias himself says 'Helen' is an effect of saying in his encomium for Helen, and if Barbara Cassin has most definitely written an encomium for the sophists in *L'effet sophistique*, who is to say that her Gorgias is not also an effect of her saying? Moreover, in any case, who is Gorgias to praise Helen? He ends his *Encomium* by saying "I wanted to write the discourse that was praise of Helen, and for me, a toy" (ES, 148). But who *toys* with praise and blame given the grave consequences of those actions that meet with praise and blame precisely because they tear society apart or draw it together?

These questions on the 'who' help us launch another thesis on theatricality as a configuration of appearance:

THESIS 2: Theatricality occurs when the 'who' is opened up as a question with unplumbed depths.

A question with unplumbed depths is a question that has no accessible answers, moreover, any answers that have been given to this question have been shown to be wrong, any answers that fill in the question of who with 'what', with what social role the character is supposed to play – wife, mother, lover, patriot – are shown to be inadequate. It is not only that there is no face behind the mask but another mask, but rather that the very identity of each of the masks is incomplete and indeterminate.

Let us now move to the second broad theatrical motif in Cassin's work, and that is her interest in the performative dimension of language, not only in John Austin's work, which meets with an extended commentary on her part only quite recently, but also in the role of language in Aristotle and Arendt's conception of the *polis*, and Desmond Tutu's discourse on the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in post-apartheid South Africa.

III. The Political Body as Performance

In *L'effet sophistique*, Cassin entitles the first section of her third chapter on politics: "The city-state as performance", sourcing this idea in Gorgias' speech on Olympus.

Perhaps it could be rephrased in verbal form – ‘the city-state is performed’ – but this would weaken the reference to John Austin’s concept of the performative, and it would also render Gorgias’ idea indistinguishable from Aristotle’s concept of the city-state as collective action. Cassin explains Gorgias’ idea in the following terms: *homonoia* (consensus, an accord of minds, not identity but the formal unity of a plurality) is produced or achieved through the use of *logos* (discourse, speech) by the internalization or integration of *stasis* (faction, conflict) (ES, 237-9). This sounds quite similar to the effect of a tragedy upon an audience’s passions according to Aristotle’s analysis of catharsis. Indeed, it leads Cassin, through a comparison between Aristotle and Plato’s models of *homonoia*, and between Arendt and Heidegger’s conceptions of the Greek city-state, to a meditation on the theatricality of the city-state itself. For Cassin, Heidegger confuses the city-state with the work of art and thus reifies it. Alongside Arendt, she distinguishes between the fabrication of a work and the realm of action. Arendt says: “The *polis* replaces art by elevating action to the highest rank in the *vita activa*, and by designating speech as what distinguishes humans from animals” (ES, 267). Cassin then turns to Heidegger’s conception of tragedy in his reading of Sophocles – since, she claims, it “sums up everything”. Heidegger identifies tragedy as the movement of *alethia*, of truth as unveiling, uncovering and withdrawal (ES, 268). In contrast, for Arendt, tragedy is “the political art par excellence” (*Human Condition*, 211 French edition). The reason given for this identity is that tragedy is the least reified imitation of action, the least reified imitation of those non-generalisable identities that are actors.

In following the line of enquiry in the third chapter on politics of part two of *L’effet sophistique*, we thus pass from the city-state as consensus brought about by a sophist’s performative discourse to Arendt’s meditation on why tragedy is a political art. These connections raise a simple question: where and how is the city-state a performance in the sense of an imitation of action? Does such a performance occur solely within the confines of a sophist’s speech and its audience’s reception and reaction? Does it occur solely for the length of the performance of a play and its echoing memory in the minds of the audience members? Or is it the case that the *polis* only ever exists as momentarily evoked in a discursive performance – its consistence not residing in some objective discourse-independent reality, but through being woven and rewoven by every single reference to it, its functions and its institutions, in the mouths of Athenians? If that were the case, then it wouldn’t be the sophists’ speech in all of its sophistication, nor the tragedians’ play in all of its splendor, that mattered in determining the performativity of the city – such discursive events would be all too rare, all too rarefied, to have a sustained effect on collective belief in the city-state. Rather it would be the repeated everyday references to the city-state, in ordinary transactions and decisions, banal employments of collective norms, to how ‘we’ do things, that would do the lion’s share of the work. But then perhaps the problem with everyday discursive evocations of the city-state is that they enter into conflict, that they form part of the play of faction which Aristotle theorized at such length in Book V of the

Politics. The city is continually manifested, gestured at, presupposed, lamented and idealized in every neighbourhood, at every time of the day, but only to divide it, only to barbarize some other – welfare queen, bludger, undocumented migrant, *islamo-gauchiste* – who enjoys excessive spoils, way beyond their part in a proper distribution. The specificity of the successful sophists' speech is that it unifies the city that it speaks of, that it brings about through its speech, by internalizing the centrifugal forces of faction, and by inventing a new consensus.

Cassin issues her own warning with regard to this idea of sophists' speech producing consensus. It is quite possible for an old consensus to be revived through the work of phrases that are in fact homonymies like 'the will of the people'; that is to say, a phrase that can be filled in with just about any semantic content whatsoever, or with approval of any policy whatsoever. The use of such phrases, Cassin states, is the "paradigm of an entirely revolutionary 'demagogic abuse'" (ES, 341). Evidently, a phrase being a homonymy is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition to specify demagogic speech. What possible distinction could Cassin make between the consensus produced by demagogy and the consensus invented by a sophists' speech, such as that of Gorgias in his *In Praise of Helen*?

This is none other than the normative question, which was bound to emerge sooner or later given Cassin's open adoption of a relativist position, and her avoidance of commitment to any of the premises of a philosophical ethics. Cassin appears to have two responses to this question. She often cites Gorgias on the production of consensus, and then turns to Protagoras, as ventriloquized by Socrates, in turn ventriloquized in the *Theatetus*, who claims that discourse is to be used to make the city move from a worse to a better state, where better is better for someone, for the city, as judged by the 'sage' (*Theatetus*, 167c; ES, 267). Cassin repeatedly refers to this passage in her work on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Of course, this kind of prescription leaves open the question of who exactly has been appointed or recognized, or elected themselves, to the position of the sage. It also leaves open the question of whether the change brought about is temporary or merely conjunctural.

The second response Cassin provides to the normative question is similar to Badiou's: novelty or invention. In *L'effet sophistique* she makes the following claim about Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen*: it presents a passage from the very idea of communion to invention, or from liturgy to that of happening (ES, 202). This claim is repeated and developed slightly in *Quand dire c'est vraiment faire*, the text on Austin's performative, where she comments on the *Encomium* as follows:

It is a moment of political invention: performance consists primarily in passing from communion via the values of a community...to the creation of new values.

The first two paragraphs of *In Praise of Helen* testify to this passage and begin to carry it out...

This is how liturgy (*kosmos, kallos, sophia, aretê, alêtheia*) opens onto a happening which performs another world; that is to say, through the manner in which a 'me' gives *logismon* [someone's thoughts] to the *logos* [discourse, reason, ration] – 'come pass from one to the other in my discourse'. (QD, 132-4)

Hence the response to the normative question is that a performative discourse helps move a political body from a worse to a better state by bringing about the invention of a new consensus. What is most significant in this passage is how Cassin binds the idea of political invention – the emergence of new collective values – to the idea of a happening. This reference to happenings – as some kind of absolute opposite to liturgy within a linear range or scale of theatrical activity – is never fleshed out: no talk of Allan Kaprow, of Robert Whitman or Claes Oldenburg, or all of recent work in performance studies on the re-enactment of happenings. So what status to accord to this signifier 'happenings' within Cassin's writings? Is it an index, a signal to something outside Cassin's text?

It just so happens that there is a string of other related concepts found in her writings: '*kairos*' or the opportune moment, improvisation, the temporality of sophistic discourse as escaping philosophy's tendency to spatialize discourse.⁷ When Philostratus characterizes Gorgias' sophistry he speaks of a discourse which is improvised in the moment, off the cuff, a discourse that unfolds solely in time, not even a thread to be followed since that would already be to spatialize it. She writes: "It is Gorgias who was at the origin of improvisation: stepping forwards in the theatre in Athens, he dared say "Propose!", *proballete*, 'throw first'" (AI, 42). This statement gives us a clear indication of how to flesh out Cassin's reference to happenings. A performative discourse tends towards the pole of a happening, and away from any trace of liturgy, when it invites chance and the audience's reaction into its own reception, and thus invites its audience to become fellow-speakers. In liturgy, the members of a community experience their unity and their force through the repetition of known rites, and the repeated imperative or question of the gap between shared faith and collective meaning and the actual codes and gestures of the rites. In a happening, in contrast, there are no known codes but fragmented ciphers to be interpreted – Why is that woman peeling oranges? What is a mountain of tyres? – and each person is no longer a member of a community but a subject of a common experience. This understanding of happenings gives us enough material for a third thesis on theatricality:

THESIS 3: Theatricality occurs when the present moment is invaded and parasitized by the uncertainty and hazard of multiple futures.

In other words, a discourse is performative both within and of the city-state when it opens up not just the possibility, but the manifest beginning, in the present moment, of multiple alternative futures – when we suddenly find ourselves in Borges' 'garden of forking paths'.

Yet the sophist seizes and opens up the present moment – *kairos* – not only through an exquisite sense of timing and sensibility, but also through the qualities of his or her voice.

IV. Words as Bodies

To explain sophistic discursivity, Cassin incessantly cites one of Gorgias' declarations: "Discourse is a grand sovereign which, by means of the smallest and most non-evident of bodies, completes the most divine acts" (ES, 66). In Gorgias' own example in *Praise of Helen*, words in the theatre are not substitutes for absent objects (as in ontology) but they directly produce passions in those who hear them (ES, 68).

Let us return to Cassin's exploration of the figure of Helen and the passage in the *Odyssey* in which Helen's actions during the war of Troy are recounted by Menelaus to his guests – after he and Telemachus have been drugged so as to moderate and mollify their reactions (*The Odyssey*, BkIV, verse 279; ES, 77). Recall: the wooden horse has been hauled inside the walls of Troy, Helen waits until nightfall, steals into the square where the horse stands. She alone was skeptical of sacred gifts from the enemy. Suspecting foul play and living surprises in the belly of the statue, she walked around the horse and called out to each of the soldiers huddling inside it in the voice of their wives, asking them to come down from the horse and to abandon their play: "yours was the voice of our long-lost wives" (*Odyssey*, IV, 313). Cassin points out that in this passage Helen is presented as the general equivalent of all women (ES, 79). What is significant for our enquiry is her imitation of the unique sound of the voice of each of the Greek soldier's wives. It is not the word in its semantic function that is acting as a body here, it is not even the word as a collection of phonemes, it is the word as sounded in a specific way, a sound that immediately recalls the 'who' of each of the soldier's wives. Her voice is fiction, each of the wives she plays is a fiction, and their calls to their husbands are fiction, yet they exert an irresistible pull on the men.

What is theatre if not precisely such a machinery? As sounds, words are material bodies. Spoken words sway our passions, spoken words make-believe, spoken words open up unseen pasts and feared futures at the level of sense, but they do so each time through the actor's voice. The actor plays with the sonority of words in time, according to a certain rhythm, in order to produce not only certain effects of sense, but also a question in the audience's mind: who is speaking here? What is this person, this character capable of, given the sound of her voice? In live theatre – as all those have taken voice lessons know – the voice is produced through the actor's body. Not only that, it is part of the actor's body, part of their physicality and part of how that physicality radiates through space. Cassin's exploration of Helen's ventriloquism thus leads us to a fourth thesis on theatricality:

THESIS 4: Theatricality occurs when the physical presence and sonority of the actor's voice creates a desire for sense in those who hear it.

When Helen speaks as all women for the men, as the unique wife for each soldier hiding in the belly of a wooden horse, she makes-believe. Fiction is the final category of Cassin's work which leads us towards theatricality.

V. Fiction and World-Making

As a sidenote to her lengthy analysis of Aristotle's 'decision of sense', Cassin often remarks that a category for fiction is created: words, phrases or discourse that have meaning but no reference – "Any statement on an object that does not exist, like the goat-stag or a chimaera" (ES, 333; QD, 101). In *L'effet sophistique* she spends some time enquiring into the status of fiction between philosophy and the sophists. With reference to Aristotle's concept of the 'verisimilar' in the *Poetics*, she remarks that Homer, above all, 'taught others to tell lies in the right manner'; that is to say, the right kind of lies so that people believe them (ES, 475). Given this connection between belief and illusion she also claims that "poetry and sophistry are indiscernable when one maintains the Aristotelian position" (ES, 475). We could take this as just an example of Cassin playing at the blurring and multiplication of genres of discourse. However, what is also at stake here is precisely this concept of fiction as *making-believe*, one which reoccurs in the following passage:

'Someone who produces illusions is more just than someone who doesn't, and someone who believes in these illusions is wiser than someone who doesn't, since being easily ravished by the pleasure of discourse is to not be deprived of sensibility.' Plutarch transmitted this fragment to us as applying to tragedy. Justice, foundation of the city-state, wisdom, foundation of *paid-eia*, in their bond with tragedy. An intrication between literature, pedagogy and politics: this is what *plasma* leads to.... (ES, 477)

Yet when we go to see a tragedy, why is it that we believe in Sophocles' illusions? How is the author of a tragedy – and the actors, and the director – capable of making us believe in these illusions? Is it the employment of some special characters of the genre 'tragedy' or 'comedy'? But surely the belief in theatre is not produced by words alone, but also by the singular way in which a few particular people move across a delimited space, *pace* Peter Brook? Or is our suspension of disbelief a mere product of the institutional conventions of theatre?

To be clear, this is not one of Cassin's questions. But she does come very close to it in many passages in her work on Austin on the performative, *Quand dire c'est vraiment faire*. Her study opens with yet another 'primitive scene', one she baptizes the 'pagan performative'. Ulysses, shipwrecked off the coast of Scheria, emerges naked and dripping from behind a bush to surprise the young princess Nausicaa and her handmaidens who had gone to the seashore to do some laundry.

In order to avoid shocking her further, he does not kneel and clasp her knees in the traditional gesture of the guest seeking hospitality, but he tells her "I take you by the knees" (Bk.6, l.149, 169). Cassin asks what are the conditions of felicity of Ulysses' performative? For Austin with illocutory speech acts such as "I do" in a church, the felicity conditions are objective institutional conventions. Ulysses' performative is felicitous, but there are no conventions that stipulate that one can speak of the gesture of a suppliant rather than actually make that gesture. Cassin's answer is that the felicity condition of "I take you by the knees" is world-making, i.e. the fabrication of an entire cosmos. Moreover Cassin specifies an intersubjective condition as the distinctive or constitutive characteristic of the pagan cosmos: "whoever you come across could be a God" (QD, 69). In other words, in Homer's world the relationships between humans, gods and animals are porous or permeable (QD, 64). She writes: "Animal, plant, man, woman, god, an undecidability that is decidable each time, a mobile flux of interactions of identity which make up the beauty of the world: there must be a *kosmos* to speak in the way Ulysses speaks" (QD, 72). Indeed, time and time again in the *Odyssey* quick assumptions about who one has just encountered are shown to be mistaken at best and dangerous at worst. In our second thesis on theatricality we said theatricality occurs when the 'who' is opened up as a question with unplumbed depths. This is quite evidently at stake in the meeting between Ulysses and Nausicaa.

But Cassin's position is complicated because unlike institutional conventions of the church, of royalty, of juridical or political institutions, Homer's pagan cosmos does not pre-exist or exist independently of Ulysses' speech. Indeed Cassin repeatedly asks what is the world-making effect of individual performatives like 'I take you by the knees'? How is it that discourse, in Gorgias' words, 'with the smallest and least apparent of bodies, performs the most divine works'? (QD, 82).

In other words, the pagan cosmos is not only the felicity condition of performatives like that of Ulysses', but such performatives also contribute to creating that pagan cosmos. The pagan cosmos does not exist elsewhere than as evoked and signified by the words spoken by Homer's characters and narrator. In a certain sense, the poem creates its own conditions of felicity at the same time as presupposing them. My contention is that this oscillation between a presupposed or independent condition of felicity for performatives – a pagan cosmos – and an internally generated condition of felicity, dependent precisely on the spoken words and performatives that evoke it, is characteristic of theatricality.

This is all the more the case once one joins Cassin and Austin in shifting from Austin's first taxonomy of speech acts to his second taxonomy. To cut a long story short, Austin adopts an initial taxonomy in which he simply distinguishes between classic statements that affirm or describe a state of affairs – constatives – and this new category of statements he says we need to recognize: all those statements that bring about a change in the world when they are enunciated. He calls them 'performatives'. He explores this distinction between constatives and performatives in his first five lectures and attempts, without much success,

to identify the criterion which characterizes all performatives. During lectures eight to ten Austin develops a new distinction within the overall category of performatives between perlocutionary acts (in which a change is produced *by* saying something) and illocutionary acts (in which a change is produced *in* saying something). In the twelfth and final lecture Austin relegates his initial taxonomy of constatives and performatives to the position of being a 'special case' and adopts a second taxonomy of locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary statements. Cassin reads this moment as a 'sea-change' in his approach in that he abandons the attempt to create a strictly defined category of statements that are performatives. In her interpretation of Austin, she claims that at that moment he moves to a general theory of all discourse as performative, and this is precisely when he reinvents the position of the sophists. Of course, there is an immediate risk: "In the *Differend*, Lyotard notes that the term performance risks becoming so enlarged that it 'loses its capacity to designate a specific regime of phrases'. This is precisely the risk that we have taken" (QD, 243). Our question is, once all discourse is recognized as performative, as having its own 'world-effect', how can the specificity of the theatrical performative be identified?

Cassin gives us a suggestion. With regard to rhetoric understood via Austin's category of a perlocutionary, she says the 'unity of measure' for perlocutory acts cannot be the statement alone, since a perlocutory act – doing something by saying something – depends on the relationship between speaker and listener and the entire discourse (QD, 104). With reference to the sophistic genre par excellence, the eulogy or rather the hymn of praise, positioned "in excess" of both philosophy and rhetoric as understood by philosophy, she says "An *epideixis* does not describe in terms of truth, it does not produce solely an effect of persuasion, but it brings about, with felicity, what I call an effect-world" (QD, 96). What happens then with theatre? Like *epideixis* it brings about, with felicity, an effect-world – in Sophocles and Shakespeare and Beckett as much as in Homer. Like perlocutory acts, it does something due to the relationship between speaker and listener – actor and audience (or the other actors) – and the entire discourse. But in theatre the 'entire discourse' includes the stage, the wings, the auditorium, and the physicality and spacing of the actors' bodies and voices. In addition – here we are tying many threads together – Cassin says of fiction: "a fiction is always a lie that knows itself to be a lie; to say it in a far more precise manner, in Greek in which this question was thematized by the second sophistic: a *plasma* is a *pseudos* that knows itself to be *pseudos*" (QD, 236). So in theatre an effect-world is created into which the actors and audience plunge, yet at the very same time they are quite aware that this world is a lie that knows itself to be a lie, make-believe that knows itself to be make-believe. Let us tie in one more thread. In response to the initial scene of this paper where Plato has the playwrights and actors expelled and banned from the hypothetical just city, Cassin prefers Aristotle's more 'sophistical' account of a consistent *polis*, due to his accentuation of plurality as its constitutive condition, and she also prefers his concept of the place of theatre in that city:

For Plato, in the *Republic*, Homer and Hesiod are *muthopoioi*, makers of grand narratives; "they lie badly", *mê kalôs*, "that's not beautiful". Let's expel them: Homer out! Aristotle, in contrast, in the *Poetics*, makes lies into the heart of that theatre which we need so as to become a community of citizens. (QD, 71)

She returns to this point in the concluding pages of the book:

I have an unshakeable belief in the necessity of rethinking our contemporary misadventures with the help of the *pseudos* – one word alone for saying together "false and lie" – and performance – to make what one says exist – thus of the flirtation between poetry, literature, philosophy, history and politics. Let's remember the spinal column of the history of philosophy. Plato: Homer and Hesiod lie badly, they are politically dangerous. Aristotle: Homer lies appropriately, he organizes the grand theatre of the city. (QD, 240)

The grand theatre of the city is evoked through the little theatre of a play or a happening that we go and see. But this play or happening doesn't always convince us and we don't recommend it to our friends: something was off whether it was the actors, the staging, the space, the story, or the audience's reaction. Other times, a play does work in that an effect-world is created. This effect-world, this cosmos, is specifically one in which its make-believe is known to be make-believe. Moreover, there is no one criterion at the level of the statement or the type of enunciation that secures a felicity condition of the construction of this world. Rather it is at the level of the whole of a theatrical performance that its felicity condition is secured – it requires a precise combination of actors' voices and bodies interacting in a precise manner within a very particular space so as to open up a shared imaginary space, with lighting, the set, the position of the spectators, and the rhythm of the words and gestures all playing their own role. At the same time, and this oscillation is characteristic of theatricality, it is also single performative utterances – "Now is the winter of our discontent" – that open up a world. It just so happens that it is precisely this oscillation between the local and the global, between a single line and something rotten in the whole of the state of Denmark, that is at stake in the relation between the little theatre and the grand theatre of the body-politic. Both Plato and Aristotle saw this: there is a metonymy at the heart of theatre between it and the city-state, a metonymy that is fundamentally fictional.

Tying all these threads together, perhaps we can try one last thesis on theatricality:

THESIS 5: Theatricality occurs when a single spoken line, a single gesture, aimed at other actors, both presupposes and generates a shared make-believe world that is known to be make-believe, a single spoken make-believe world that both presupposes and generates the shared body-politic as subject to knowing make-believe.

This how lying risks becoming a blood-sport.

Notes

1. Barbara Cassin, *L'Effet sophistique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), p.35. Henceforth all references to this text will be signalled in the body of the essay with the abbreviation 'ES' and a page number. The bloodsport Cassin refers to is none other than Gorgias' parody of Parmenides "being is being", a parody which undoes the apparent identity and throws the entire history of philosophy, and hence the very profession of those who would still call themselves 'philosophers', into deep confusion.
2. Readers who are familiar with Heidegger's 'destruction of metaphysics or ontotheology' and Derrida's deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence, or even Deleuze's writing of a minor history of philosophy should have their ears pricking up about now.
3. Cassin writes, "I employ the term 'effet sophistique' [the effect of sophistics] to indicate the way in which a sophistical history of philosophy makes the history of philosophy tremble" (*Aristote et le logos* 4; hereafter AL).
4. "that violent critique of ontology that constitutes sophistics" (AL, 4).
5. I know a song which annoys people: "I know a song which annoys people: '....'."
6. "J'aimerais sur le papier comme mettre en scène cette *Hélène* en distendant la vocation platonicienne et la vocation sophistique" (ES, 82).
7. In particular see the entry on "Rhetorique: ou l'espace/temps" in Cassin's *L'archipel des idées de Barbara Cassin* (Paris: Editions de la Maison de Sciences de l'homme, 2014), 41-50.

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ARKA CHATTOPADHYAY

LOGICAL SPACE IN LACAN: FROM POE'S LETTER
TO VALDEMAR'S BODY

I. Spaces: Imaginary-Symbolic-Real

This article attempts to build on the somewhat underdeveloped theme of spatial dynamics in Jacques Lacan's "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'" in order to make a larger argument about the logical approach to Real space in his later teachings.¹ The purpose of this intervention is to promulgate a notion of 'logical space' in Lacan, analogous to his construction of 'logical time' that underwrites the reading of Edgar Poe's story, "The Purloined Letter." By evoking another Poe tale also admired by Lacan, namely, "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar," I wish to show how we can situate 'logical space' as a corporeal aspect of the Real that responds to the category of 'logical time.'

Developing Freud's characterization of the unconscious as timeless, Lacan suggests that unconscious time is not chronological but logical. In his 1945 essay on the subject, "Logical time," Lacan presents an inter-subjective modulation of temporality in which the subject encounters the tension between hesitation and haste in the logic of the unconscious. The three scansion of logical time, mapped through the problem of the prisoners' dilemma are: "The Instant of the Glance," "The Time for Comprehending" and "The Moment of Concluding." As Lacan concludes, the subject anticipates a certainty in the logical form of an assertion, expressing different modulations of time. But what about space in all this? In other words, is there a logic of space in Lacan's thought that connects back to logical time and its complex moments, suspending anticipation between hesitation and haste? This question is of interest to this article. Let me begin by approaching this logical space through the Lacanian topology of the Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real as three registers of this spatial logic.

To clarify, when I relate logic to the three Lacanian orders, I refer to the operative principle or principles by which the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real orders may work. Having said that, there is a special status of logic for the Real order. As the later Lacan repeatedly observes, the Real can only be approached through logic.

He engages with Frege's mathematical logic to arrive at a notion of '+1' or the 'one-multiple' that has Real written all over it. This '+1' creates an impasse in the system by adding itself to the number series as the signifier of inexistence or the originary zero, counted as one. In a similar way, Lacan's use of Aristotle's propositional logic produces a Real logic of the 'not-all'. To echo the definition of the Real from *Seminar XX*, it is "an impasse of formalization" (1998, 93). To put it in another way, the Real is the impossible of mathematical and logical formalizations. In *Seminars XIX* and *XX*, Lacan relates the Real to a logic of writing. Moving through Aristotle's modal categories of necessity, possibility and contingency, he inscribes a fourth modality, i.e., the Real as the impossible through a logic of double-negation: "what doesn't stop not being written" (1998, 59). Moreover, the Borromean triad itself is established as a Real knot in *Seminars XXI* to *XXIII*. So, there is quite evidently a logic of the Real. However, what interests me in this article is a spatial dynamic of this logic of the Real, or in other words, what I am calling 'Real space' in Lacan.

In what follows, I will treat Lacan's late work with the geometry of warped surfaces in the Borromean knot as a *topo-logical* extension of his interest in the mathematical and the logical. The Borromean topology provides Lacan with a final paradigm of logical inscription to approach the unconscious topography (the spatiality of the unconscious as a Freudian legacy). He *writes* the knotting of the three orders of the psyche (Real-Symbolic-Imaginary) in the topological form of the Brunnian link/chain, i.e. the Borromean knot. This topology offers a logic for the Real writing that happens in the unconscious. Stated differently, the Borromean clinic yields a Real unconscious in final Lacan. In this article I will mobilize the implication of the Borromean knot as a space and connect it with a Real spatial logic. When I call this Real space, a 'logical space', it does not mean that there cannot be Imaginary and Symbolic spaces that are logical in their own rights. I will spell them out as we proceed. However, given the special connection between logic and the Real, I am more interested in Real logical space than the avatar of logic in the spatiality of the other two orders.

In his "Commentary on the Graphs" at the end of *Écrits*, Jacques-Alain Miller articulates a certain logic of space for the unconscious subject. He reflects: "*there is no longer any occultation of the symbolic* in the topology that Lacan establishes because this space is the very space in which the subject's logical relations are schematized" (Lacan, 2006, 858; emphasis original). In this remark, there is a nestled notion of 'logical space.' This topological space schematizes the subject's logical relations. It does not hide the Symbolic anymore. As Miller suggests, in its Symbolic over-determination, this logical space "prohibit[s] imaginary capture" (858). Miller's logical space is primarily a reference to Lacan's graphs. It cuts out the Imaginary through the Symbolic. Miller is quick to differentiate this "symbolic space" from a Kantian "space of intuition" (862), but in his thinking, this space is dominated by the Symbolic and he remains silent on the Real here. Is the logical space just Symbolic then? What about its purchase on the Real? Stated differently, how does logical space relate to the Real? As we know, for the Lacan of *Seminar XXI*, logic is

the unmistakable “science of the Real” (session of 12.2.1974)? In what follows, I will trace a Real logic of space in Lacan.

Just as there is a Symbolic dimension of space that becomes dominant in the graphs, there is also another, i.e., Imaginary aspect of space, which Lacan thinks at some length across many essays in *Écrits*. This is the space of the mirror, of course. Lacan calls this a “kaleidoscopic” space “in which the imagery of the ego develops and which intersects the objective space of reality” (2006, 99). This notion of space emerges from mirrorical projection. But, as Lacan contends, this imaginary space is not the be-all and end-all of the subject. He underlines how the mirror may not reflect anything to the subject on certain occasions:

[w]hen man, seeking to empty himself of all thoughts, advances in the shadowless gleam of *imaginary space*, abstaining from even awaiting what will emerge from it, a dull mirror shows him a surface in which nothing is reflected (2006, 153; emphasis mine).

How does this absence of reflection alter the Imaginary space? Does it not introduce a bit of Real into it? When the subject is at the limit of its thinking, an emptying out of thought installs the Real as that which cannot be thought. It is interesting to note that Lacan moves from this mirror without reflection to an enigmatic glimpse of “unextended” and “indivisible” space that speaks back to logical time (153).¹ Though Lacan still thinks through this space in *gestalts* or images, one can see a cut of the Real in it precisely because this space interrupts imaginary reflection or mirroring.

It is the Real dimension of the Lacanian unconscious that has been foregrounded in recent studies as well as in the practice of 21st century Lacanian psychoanalysis.² As I see it, the later-Lacan’s project of situating the unconscious in and through Borromean logic and topological geometry bespeaks a Real logic of space. This spatial aspect of the Real in the logic of the unconscious has remained underexplored and hence this attempt to construct a Real logical space in Lacan. For instance, in the essay, “Position of the Unconscious,” Lacan grounds the unconscious as a Real logical space in topological terms. This is a space, built on gaps and holes, rather than any solid substance. Talking about this “open sesame” of the unconscious that opens and closes in the same breath, Lacan observes: “[t]he structure of what closes [*se ferme*] is, indeed, inscribed in a geometry in which space is reduced to a combinatory: it is what is called an ‘edge’ in topology” (2006, 711). This topological space is reduced to a combinatorial logic of the “edge” that flattens out the

1. Lacan’s expression—a “kind of time that is caught between expectation and release, a time of phases and repetition” (153)—gestures towards the logical time, caught between hesitation and haste.

2. For example, see Colette Soler’s book, *Lacan—The Unconscious Reinvented* in which she discusses the Real unconscious at length.

distinctions between inside and outside. We will return to this liminal notion of the edge through the geometry of point as hole.

II. Space in “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter’”

Let me turn to the dynamic of space in Lacan’s reading of Poe. To state that “The Purloined Letter” is a story about spatial displacement is to speak the obvious. Lacan himself highlights that the story demonstrates how “the signifier’s displacement determines subjects’ acts, destiny, refusals, blindnesses, success, and fate” (21). Though this sounds self-evident, space has been tackled primarily as a signifying position for the subject in this story and not so much as an independent entity in itself. In other words, the critical move has been from the signifier to its changing loci and not space in its Real dimensions. In his reading of Poe’s story, Lacan famously distinguishes between the Symbolic and the Real functions of spatiality:

For it can *literally* [*à la lettre*] be said that something is not in its place only of what can change places—that is, of the symbolic. For the real, whatever upheaval we subject it to, is always and in every case in its place; it carries its place stuck to the sole of its shoe, there being nothing that can exile it from it. (17; emphasis original)

While Lacan’s reading has elicited a lot of discussion on spatial displacement through the logical metonymy of the signifier, I would focus on this other functionality of space as Real wherein stasis rules over motility. This motionless Real space that remains immune to the signifier’s gymnastics will be our object of attention. In *Seminar X*, Lacan makes a telling distinction between lack and hole to talk about the Real in spatial terms. He says that “the real is teeming with hollows” and in the same breath, he clarifies that “the real doesn’t lack anything” (185). What is this Real space that is full of holes and yet does not lack anything? Lack belongs to the Symbolic order while the Real is unlacking, so to speak. On the other hand, this unlacking space of the Real, is full of holes, drilled by the letter as it writes itself in the Real. The fact that the Real does not have any lack ensures that it remains immovable. If there were lacks in the Real, they would have triggered a movement, akin to the metonymy of desire that runs through the lacking chain of signifiers. This static space is full of holes but they do not allow it to generate motion in any way.

To address the theme of space in some of the existing literature on Lacan’s reading of “The Purloined Letter,” we find it only as a passing reference. For Norman Holland, the story is a “study in the way we use spatial metaphors for states of mind” (320). He considers the movement of turning the inside into the outside vis-à-vis the letter as the principal operation of the story. But he does not mark this out as a topological operation. We shall see how Lacan’s topological externalization of the inside and vice versa ultimately erases the distinction between interiority and exteriority and generates an “extimacy.” It is key to this spatial dynamic. While this might seem

to contradict the immovability of the Real, it is not a contradiction because the topological movement that flattens out the partition of inside and outside makes the Real space unlackling. It is this topological movement of mathematical inscription that enables us to arrive at this Real space that is undifferentiated, unlackling and unmoving. We will come back to Lacan's mobilization of this topological space as a non-Euclidian space of the Real in his later teachings.

To return to the existing figuration of space in "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter,'" Barbara Johnson's famous essay on Lacan's reading of the Poe-story touches upon the question of space in terms of what she calls "frame" and "framing." She treats the frame as a borderline space and appreciates Lacan's project of testing "limits of spatial logic" and "breaking out of" the Euclidean model (481). As Johnson acknowledges, "breaking out of" spatiality is itself a spatial metaphor and hence, what we are looking at is not so much a flat renunciation of spatial logic but, more of an attempt to find a new logic of space. We will see how Lacan's late thoughts on a Real logic of space, if not a Real logical space, grapples with its ontological dimension. Does this 'logical space' of holes have any being (in the ontological sense)? We will return to this question through Lacan's recourse to the Borromean chain as a support for topological space. Discussing the police's search in the minister's apartment in "The Purloined Letter", Lacan thinks through the question of space in the register of exhaustion. For the police, it is important to cover every nook and crevice. Their Imaginary programme is premised on this totalistic "exhaustion of space." It is interesting that Lacan calls this spatial exhaustion more than "literal." He calls it a "theoretical" concern (16). His question about space at this point triggers the movement from a depth model of psychic space to a psyche of surfaces:

The division of the entire surface into numbered "compartments," which was the principle governing the operation, is presented to us as so accurate that "the fiftieth part of a line," it is said, could not escape the probing of the investigators. Are we not then within our rights to ask how it happened that the letter was not found *anywhere*, or rather to observe that nothing we are told about a higher-caliber conception of concealment ultimately explains how the letter managed to escape detection, since the field exhaustively combed did in fact contain it, as Dupin's discovery eventually proved? (16; emphasis original)

The principle of spatial exhaustion, operating at the level of an Imaginary-Symbolic complex fails when an encounter happens with the Real space as inexhaustible surface, rather than exhaustible depths of compartmentalized space. Lacan draws our attention to Poe's meticulously detailed descriptions of this spatial structure of investigation:

from the division of that space into volumes from which the slightest bulk cannot escape detection, to needles probing soft cushions, and, given that they cannot simply sound the hard wood [for cavities], to an examination

with a microscope to detect gimlet-dust from any holes drilled in it, and even the slightest gaping in the joints [of the furniture]. (17)

Lacan gives a certain independence to space as an entity here: “As their network tightens to the point that, not satisfied with shaking the pages of books, the police take to counting them, don’t we see space itself shed its leaves like the letter?” (17). When space sheds its own leaves, we realize “the imbecility of the realist” that restricts space to a realistic idea of hiding where something is hidden in unfathomable depths. As opposed to this realist’s space, we encounter the Real space wherein the hidden is “not in its place.” The letter has been hidden by making sure that it is not in its place. This elsewhere is no impenetrable depth but an evident surface which displaces depth. Just as there is no distinction between inside and outside in the Real, there is no difference between depth and surface in the Real. In the Real logic of space, depth is transformed into surface.

The letter is in the same place. The police scan exhaustively and yet they cannot find it because there are two different subjective approaches to space at work within the same locus. Miller spots this in his notes to *Seminar XXIII*: “a Euclidian metrical space, the only space that the police in ‘The Purloined Letter’ move about in. The police fail to spot the paradoxical relationships, even the singularities, that are authorized by topology” (2016, 200). As he rightly observes, topological space is a non-Euclidian entity and the Borromean nodality that Lacan adopts in his later teachings is characteristic of his emphasis on this other kind of space. The letter is right there and elsewhere at the same time. It is in a Real point on that space that has zero dimensionality. Hence it does not exist for the policeman’s Symbolic-Imaginary framework which involves a linear compartmentalization. For them, space starts from the line which has one dimension but in the Real, as we shall see, space concerns the zero-dimensionality of the point.

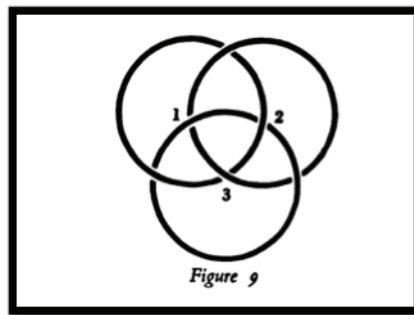
III. Real Borromean Space: Point to Hole in Ontology

Let me sketch out here, the Real ‘logical space’ in the later-Lacan’s emphasis on the true hole in the Real. We will investigate this Real logic of space by considering whether or not it has a solid ontological dimension. In *Seminar XXI*, Lacan talks about the “three dimensions of the space inhabited by the speaking being” as “*dit*-mansions” (constructions/mansions of what is said/*dit*) of the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real (session of 13.11.1973). This means there is an Imaginary, a Symbolic and a Real space for the speaking body of the subject. Lacan also points out in the same session that this is neither the intuitive space of Greek geometry, nor is it the Cartesian coordinates. This is a new geometry of Borromean knots—the so-called “rings of string.” He calls this a space of points and this is how he defines the Borromean point: “if you pull somewhere on any one of these rings of string, you see that there is a point, a point which is somewhere there where the three are squeezed” (session of 13.11.1973).

In *Seminar XX*, Lacan has another definition of the point:

What cuts a line is a point. Since a point has zero dimensions, a line is defined as having one dimension. Since what a line cuts is a surface, a surface is defined as having two dimensions. Since what a surface cuts is space, space has three dimensions. (1998, 122)

Lacan calls this a cut-centric approach to space—a “sawing technique” (131) and qualifies the point which does not have a dimension as a mark of inexistence or, shall we say, Real *ex-sistence*: “It is even reflected in the notion of the point, for the fact that it qualifies as one that which has, as is clearly stated, zero dimensions - that is, that which doesn’t exist - says it all” (131). The Real logical space thus takes after the knotty topology of points where the principle of spacing lies in what Lacan calls “wedging.” The Real point is not just a point. In the Borromean space, the Real point is a Real hole. When the three rings are not squeezed together to



Seminar XX, 132

form a knot, we can see three points:

These three points are wedged together when the rings are squeezed and we get a “threefold point” in the Borromean knot. The important detail is that this point does not hark back to the one-dimensionality of the line. As Lacan clarifies, this triple-point is not just an ordinary point: “This point is not constituted here by the convergence of three lines, if nothing else because there are two different points – a right and a left” (132). This is a point made of other points. This is a space of holes that are points and vice versa. In *Seminar XXII*, it is this triple-point that Lacan goes on to call the “inviolable hole” (session of 11.3.1975). He makes a further distinction between true and false holes (see *Seminar XXIII*, 67). A true hole is that which an infinite line has passed through while a false hole is not constituted by an infinite line. In other words, the Borromean holes are true holes insofar as the knot cannot be formed without infinite lines and circles. For me, this true hole that helps constitute the Borromean knot through an equivalence of the infinite line and the circle is the logical space of the Real. It is a space of points that lead to further points, wedged together. Most importantly, these points are also holes, ratified by an infinite straight line, running through them. As Lacan says in *Seminar XXII*, without a hole, one cannot make a Borromean knot (session of 17.12.1974). In the

same seminar, he also draws a necessary connection between the hole of the Real and the order of *ex-sistence*. As Rona Cohen, reading Lacan's spatial being, suggests, "[w]ith topology, Lacan addresses this dimension of space, as *real*" (219; emphasis original). In agreement with her derivation of Real space, let me state that while her focus is on the functions of object and being in this Real space, I am more concerned with the *logic* of the Real that governs this spatiality vis-à-vis the hole and the point.

The hole of the triple-point in the Borromean link is a space that has no solid being. It is not a space shared by the three rings and yet it is a twist around the central hole that makes the knot of three. It is not a space in a foundational and ontological sense because it has no presence without the rings and their knotting. The squeezing tightens the three points into one hole but none of the three rings can ontologically claim that space to be its own. Without that hole, the Borromean or Brunnian link will cease to exist but at the same time, this hole-point of Real space does not have any ontological status as a space in itself. It has no being but as the logical cause of the entire Borromean structure, this Real space has an *inexistence* that is etched out nevertheless. Being devoid of being, it is a motionless space. Having no existence, it cannot move. The things that move in and around this hole-point are the infinite lines that have formed rings while the hole-point as an index of Real space remains immovable. Having no being, this space cannot lack anything. For it to lack something, it has to have some substantive being. This space is unmoving and unlacking, not to mention that it does not have an ontological dimension. It is the zero-dimensionality of the hole-point. This is the fundamental difference between Cohen's and my critical positions on the matter. While she is interested in developing Lacanian topology as a consolidation of spatial ontology, for me, it is the topological or logical space of the Borromean chain that creates an impasse in ontology.³ In a spatial sense, topology creates warps in ontological solidity. Cartesian and Euclidian space might have a certain degree of ontological solidity but topological space introduces heterogeneity into that consistency. To say this in another way, ontological space is more Imaginary than anything else while topological space is dominated by the Real. The locus of the hole-point, generated in this non-Euclidean space, jettisons the affirmation of space that has any solid ontological being. The Real logical space that makes a hole of a point and a point of a hole does not have any being. It does not exist. The only thing, it has, is *ex-sistence*.

In my argument, it is the point as hole that stands for a Real locus of *ex-sistence* and unlike the Symbolic-Imaginary space of volumes, this is a space of zero-ontology. The point that enables the twist around the central hole of the Borromean knot does not have a being because that space only comes into being as a hole when the twisted third ring goes through the points on the two other wedged rings, to form a knot. This hole is not a point, shared by any of the three rings insofar as

3. One may consider Alenka Zupančič's arguments on sexuality as an impasse in ontology in Freud and Lacan as a parallel and complementary approach to the complex question of Lacanian ontology. For more, see her book, *Why Psychoanalysis? Three Interventions*.

they do not go into one another. In the Borromean knot, the three constituent rings only lie side by side or, in other words, one on top of the other. The point-hole of the Real logical space thus has no shared being. This is a space that bores holes in being. This is the logical, rather than *onto-logical* space where the Minister keeps the letter hidden in Poe's story. It will never be found in any examination that is premised on a solid ontology of depths. It can only be approached through the logic of the zero, operative in the logical *ex-sistence* of Real space as a locus of hollows. In *Seminar XX*, Lacan defines "pure space" as a space "based on the notion of the part, as long as one adds to that the following, that all of the parts are external to each other – *partes extra partes*" (23; emphasis original). This is not the Cartesian space of extensionality where one part extends into another. As Lacan clarifies, all the parts are extraneous to one another. This is a fragmentary space where parts have replaced any notion of wholeness. Lacan calls this Real space, a "mathematician" who knows how to go beyond an intuitive understanding of spatiality (135). This is the logical space of the Real which knows how to count. Counting numbers are connected to counting holes in the rings of string that make up a Borromean space of chains and knots.⁴

Seminar XXI evokes "vector space" and "fibred space," taking the plot from *Seminar XX* where Lacan discusses the space of *jouissance* as a "compact" topological space. In *Seminar XXI*, he emphasizes the heterogeneous character of topological space by dwelling on the notion of 'neighbourhood,' intrinsic to topology. As he suggests, this is not a homogeneous neighbourhood. It is marked with an 'axiom' of otherness: "everything that forms part of a topological space, if it is to be put in a neighbourhood, implies that there is something else in the same neighbourhood" (session of 15.1.1974). This something else is the trace of heterogeneity in Real topological space. In *Seminar XX*, Lacan continues to talk about this set-theoretical heterogeneity in terms of cracks, faults and holes in topological space:

Nothing is more compact than a fault, assuming that the intersection of everything that is enclosed therein is accepted as existing over an infinite number of sets, the result being that the intersection implies this infinite number. That is the very definition of compactness. (1998, 9)

We are back to the space of "faults" or "holes" and these holes indicate an infinite locus of the Real. Lacan notes that this is not a homogenous space but an "intersection extending to infinity" (9). This logico-mathematical heterogeneity is a pointer that there is no singular or uniform logic of the Real. The logical space in its Real incarnation is all about fragmentation, ambivalence and antinomy. This space is intersectional as well. It is poised on cusps, edges and holes. The extensional presence of the infinite line makes this into a true hole of the Real. Lacan goes on to call this a space of open sets that exclude their own limits and constitute a

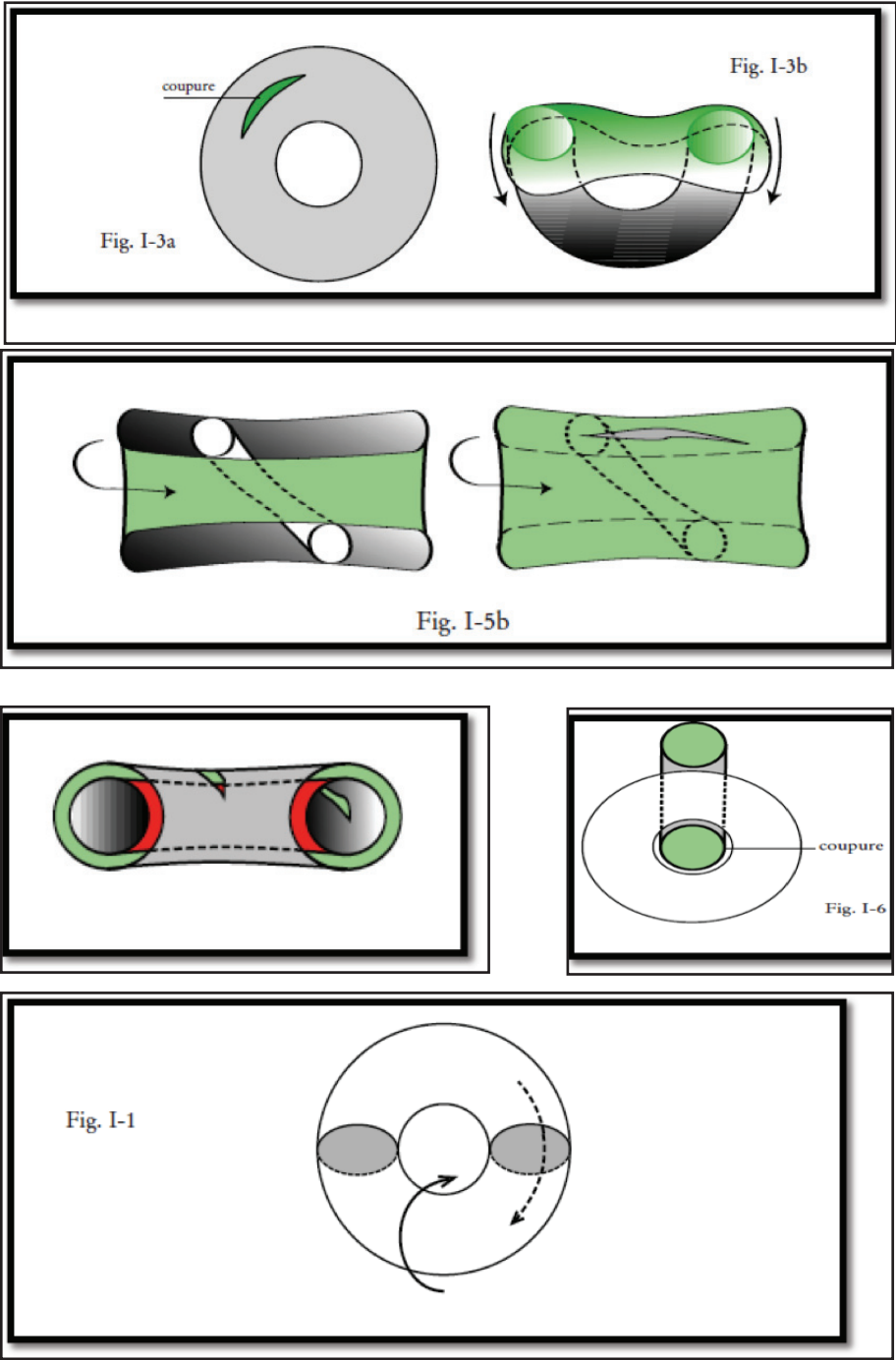
4. The zero-dimensionality of the Borromean point connects with the number zero and what Lacan makes of it by mobilizing the work of Frege and the logic of the plus-One where the originary zero of the number series comes back to haunt numerical succession.

finite series that can only be counted one by one (10). Approaching each of these open spaces one by one in the domain of sexual *jouissance* is not what this article is concerned with. But the movement of the one-by-one echoes Lacan's topological evocation of the Borromean knot which constitutes three Ones that are alone in themselves, i.e., without any one-on-one rapport. The Borromean structure highlights the agency of this One, insofar as releasing any one ring dissolves the entire chain. This space is a space of the One in the sense that each of the rings is One-all-alone. Thus, we have to go one-by-one in the Borromean space. This One is also the One of the speaking body.

IV. Logical Space and Body

In what follows, I will connect the Real logical space with corporeality. Extending Freud's point that the subject is not aware of psychic space, Rona Cohen observes that the subject of the unconscious lacks knowledge about its embodiment and spatiality (216). She makes an argument about being that is homologous to my own, regarding the body. For Cohen, being does not occupy a place. Being is itself a place. She addresses the body as a structure that goes beyond the Imaginary specularity of the mirror and charts Real space. The connection between body and space is given a thought in *Seminar XX*: "[i]n their complexity, knots are well designed to make us relativize the supposed three dimensions of space, founded solely on the translation we give for our body in a solid volume" (1998, 133). Solid geometry provides a corporeal modality that goes well with the Borromean spatial logic of the Real. For Lacan, the three dimensions of space are founded on embodiment in terms of how the body occupies a solid volume in space. But the Borromean knot relativizes this dimensionality and changes the notion of embodied space as well. In *Seminar XXIV*, Lacan makes a gesture towards this other kind of space that the body inaugurates: "Space seems to be extension when we are dealing with Descartes. But the body founds for us the idea of another kind of space" (session of 16.11.1976). He grounds this corporeal space in a torus which produces a tube when turned inside out. Torus, in this seminar, becomes Lacan's preferred topological shape to discuss the Real of the body. A tube appears when the torus is cut open and topologically turned inside out through continuous deformation and transformation. The tube disappears when the torus is reconstituted with its inside on the outside and vice versa. This tube is a figure for the body in its Real structure. This is the Real spatial structure of the body that is susceptible to cutting and "extimacy." Let me highlight the intersectional nature of this Real body. If the tube presents the Real of the body in some sense, it is precisely because it is a result of the topological operation of cutting and turning inside out. The Real of the body appears and disappears in these corporeal transitions, i.e. the operation of cutting open the torus.

With the torus, we are looking at multiple holes: the hole at the heart of the torus and the hole inside it through which we can run a series of other tori (see fig. I-1, *Seminar XXIV*, session of 16.11.1976, opposite).



According to Lacan, the human body has an asymmetrical relation with space. The asymmetry of the signifier and the signified translates into the asymmetry of the container and the contained, which has a particular corporeal function (session of 21.12.1976). The speaking body as container contains space that is asymmetrical vis-à-vis the body and vice versa. Instead of thinking embodied space, we are thinking of body itself as Real space here. It has its hollows, surfaces and topological movements of internalization and externalization. In his “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” Lacan connects space with body when he compares the letter with “an immense female body, sprawl[ing] across the space of the Minister’s office when Dupin enters it” (2006, 26). Without going into the sexual identification of the body as female which relates to the letter’s feminizing features, let us continue to think the human body which has a Real structure, i.e. a logical space in itself.

V. Reading Valdemar: The Space of Death

Let me now turn to the other Poe story, “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” to show how the Real logical space of the human body reacts to ‘logical time.’ To clarify, this article is less about logical time which is an established Lacanian notion and more about establishing a new notion from Lacan, i.e., logical space. I am not claiming any simplistic space-time coordinate here but only registering the kind of reaction logical space might have on logical time. I will do this by going back to Poe whose “The Purloined Letter” was a story that helped Lacan in thinking through logical time. The story in analysis is “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” and it is a story Lacan was more than aware of. It is interesting to note how the standard interpretations of this 1845 gothic story have almost inevitably centred around the protagonist’s impossible articulation of his own death and complications of identity.⁵ Roland Barthes reads into the story the relation between death and language, among other things, while Jacques Derrida considers death/exclusion of the ‘I’ as a pre-requisite for speech act. In a significantly different reading, Hannah Murray approaches the story from a medical humanities perspective and reads into it the politics of control over the Other’s body in the context of medical processes. There are queer as well as deconstructivist readings foregrounding ‘telegraphy.’⁶ The final state of the human body as mess and the torsions it produces in space as well as time have been largely ignored in these readings. This is the aspect I will try and unlock through the Lacanian installation of speaking body as ‘logical space’ here. We will see how the subject-body of Valdemar, caught in a limbo between life and death and uttering the linguistically impossible sentence, “I am dead” speaks

5. See Barthes’ essay “Textual Analysis of Poe’s ‘Valdemar’” or Derrida’s reference to the story in *Speech and Phenomena* (1973, 97). They dwell on the structural impossibility of the sentence “I am dead” and ground their notions of subjectivity on its basis. See also Derrida’s comments on the story in *The Structuralist Controversy* (155-156).

6. For a queer reading of Valdemar, see Suzanne Ashworth’s piece and for a Derridean reading of writing in the story, see Adam Frank’s article.

to Lacan's notion of logical time and the disintegrating corporeal space as a Real refers back to temporality.

'The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar' is a story that draws Lacan's attention as early as 1954-55, during *Seminar II*. In the story, the narrator who practices hypnosis, is able to freeze his friend Valdemar in the borderline zone of life and death in the body. He mesmerizes him on the verge of death and thereby stalls the decay of the body. In the shocking final moment, when the ethically troubled narrator withdraws the hypnotic spell, Valdemar's body becomes a putrid pool of liquid within a second. The arrested post-mortal decay of the body is expedited in this time warp that is hardly chronological but logical. After hypnotizing Valdemar, the narrator keeps asking him whether he is asleep and the three answers he gives at three different points in time are as follows:

1. "Yes; —asleep now. Do not wake me! —let me die so!"
2. "Yes; still asleep—dying."
3. "Yes; —no; —I *have been* sleeping —and now —now —I *am dead*" (79-81; emphasis mine).

These three answers chart a movement from consciousness to the most radical point in a paradoxical state where death has eliminated consciousness and yet, due to the arrested time of hypnosis, a distinctly dead voice remains in the body. We could compare these three statements with the three moments of Lacan's logical time: instant of the glance, time for comprehending and moment of concluding. Lacan's subjective logic of time finds a linguistic mode of expression here in Valdemar's three sentences. They bring us back to the body as a speaking-body and logical space as a space *bodily* "inhabited by the speaking-being", to echo Lacan's aforementioned quote from *Seminar XXI*. Poe evokes the image of distance and touch to give a peculiar attribute of deadness to this voice that can say, "I am dead." To quote his analogies:

In the first place, the voice seemed to reach our ears —at least mine —from a vast distance, or from some deep cavern within the earth. In the second place, it impressed me (I fear, indeed, that it will be impossible to make myself comprehended) as gelatinous or glutinous matters impress the sense of touch. (81)

The voice is said to come from some hellish under-earth and it feels like jelly on touching. These images create a sense of space ('cavern') and materiality ('glutinous matters') for the voice. They also have a paradoxical implication of corporeality. Though the voice does not have a physical body, the aforementioned images of touching and gelatinous feel create an impossible sense of corporeality for it. Here we have the climax of a triadic scansion of logical time. To place the three Symbolic acts in logical time, the first articulation that said Valdemar is sleeping and wants to die in sleep is, in Lacan's language, "the instant of the glance" that frames the predicament. The second utterance solidifies "the time for comprehending" when

the subject surmises that he is still asleep and will soon die. The final speech presents the “moment of concluding” in encapsulating the previous two temporal scissions. It hesitates to articulate the state of death in language, the linguistic impossibility that, for Barthes, is the psychoanalytic core of this story.⁷

Instead of dwelling on speaking the unspeakable sentence “I am dead” which introduces a bit of Real into the Symbolic structure of utterance, I would argue that the speech-sequence whereby Valdemar announces his changing state is located in logical time. Hypnosis has put an end to *chronos* for Valdemar. In other words, for hypnotized Valdemar, there exists no chronological time anymore. But time still remains in a strange subjective way. Valdemar keeps saying things that are located in time. These articulations are logically frozen in inter-subjective temporality—a time that remains in the form of a gap between the narrator and Valdemar. Valdemar initially says that he feels no pain; so, the narrator feels less troubled about his experiment from a moral perspective. But, as we proceed and he asks the question again and again, Valdemar’s voice twists in suffering and implores the narrator either to restore his consciousness or end it altogether. It is at this point that the narrator offers his reverse passes and the temporal warp is neutralized. Logical time returns to chronological time and we encounter the carrion — the scrap that the human body is and that which it becomes:

his whole frame at once – within the space of a single minute, or even less, shrunk – crumbled – absolutely rotted away beneath my hands. Upon the bed, before that whole company, there lay a nearly liquid mass of loathsome – of detestable putridity (83).

In *Seminar II*, while referring to the Valdemar story, Lacan dwells, on the Real and unnamable aspect of this corporeal waste. This is a liquefaction of the subject-body into a Real mass of unspeakability. Poe himself links space with time in the expression “the space of a single minute” and his use of the word “shrunk” presents a specifically topological movement in the matrix of space and time. Lacan reflects on this final state of the body in the following way:

M. Valdemar is no more than a disgusting liquefaction, something for which no language has a name, the naked apparition, pure, simple, brutal, of this figure which it is impossible to gaze at face on, which hovers in the background of all the imaginings of human destiny, which is beyond all qualification, and for which the word carrion is completely inadequate, the complete collapse of this species of swelling that is life – the bubble bursts and dissolves down into inanimate putrid liquid (1988, 231-232).

Lacan makes the Real character of this dead matter quite obvious in this passage. To note the fundamental but important point, this Real “putrid liquid” is a

7. Barthes reads this sentence as a paradox of affirmation and negation, i.e. “I am dead and I am not dead.” He also reads it as a return of death as the primally repressed into the order of language (see 1981, 154).

transformation of corporeal space. It is nothing but a topological transformation. What was inside the body and invisible has become visible by coming out. This externalization of corporeal inside lends a topological dimension to this decay. The body has become this Real space for which the metaphysical-ontological language does not have a signifier. It is a space that cannot be named by the Symbolic-Imaginary semantics. This is the space of the Real that is strictly senseless and silent. The silence of the putrid liquid is a memory of corporeal solidity. It is the terminal limit of the body that speaks. This is a once-body, suffused with the silence of unspeakable Real. It is a corporeal counterpart to the telling speech of "I am dead."

It is interesting to note that Poe wrote another piece on mesmeric practices in 1849, titled "Mesmeric Revelation." It involved a discursive and philosophical dialogue between the mesmerist and his subject, someone whose name reminds us of the tale in analysis: Vankirk. The text goes into meditations on matter and space among many other things. At one point in the dialogue, Vankirk says to the mesmerist:

There are many things on the Earth, which would be nihility to the inhabitants of Venus – many things visible and tangible in Venus, which could not be brought to appreciate as existing at all. But to the inorganic beings – to the angels – the whole of the unparticled matter is substance that is to say, the whole of what we term "space" is to them the truest substantiality; – the stars, meantime, through what we consider their materiality, escaping the angelic sense, just in proportion as the unparticled matter, through what we consider its immateriality, eludes the organic. (Poe 2005, 73)

The above passage on space from a text that rewrites *Valdemar* in a different form of the essay bolsters my argument about body as space. As we can see here, Vankirk, the spectral double of *Valdemar*, relativizes the ideas of matter and space, claiming that what we human beings call "space" might have the material substantiality of a body for non-human beings. Following the same logic, we can say that the human body is, from another perspective, nothing but space.

To make the connection with logical time clearer at the level of troping, let us look into the passage from Lacan's essay on logical time:

[...] we witness the reappearance of the *objective time* of the initial intuition of the movement which, as though sucked up between the instant of its beginning and the haste of its end, had seemed to burst like a bubble. Owing to the force of doubt, which exfoliates the subjective certainty of the *moment of concluding*, objective time condenses here like a nucleus in the interval of the first *suspended motion*, and manifests to the subject its limit in the *time for comprehending* that, for the two others, the *instant of the glance* has passed and that the moment of concluding has returned (171; emphases original).

Let me emphasize the figurative similarity between Lacan's two passages—the one above from *Écrits* and the aforementioned one from *Seminar II*. They both deploy

the same metaphor of bubble-bursting. When Lacan talks about the return of chronological time after a logical scansion, the time that was logically sliced in between, *bursts* like a bubble. This is the same metaphor Lacan uses to describe the final transformation of Valdemar's body into the Real space of dead matter. The bubble-burst in Lacan's essay signals the return of chronological time. It is the same return of temporal chronology that allows us to see the transformation of Valdemar's body-space into unnameable matter. Valdemar's body had already undergone the putrid liquefaction in the chronological order of decay in the human corpse. But thanks to the narrator's hypnotic spell, this condition was frozen in time. With this logical time of hypnosis withdrawn, we could see the carrion in the resurfacing of chronological time in the final moment of the story. But what I want to emphasize here is the mutation of logical time into space as Valdemar's body in its Real fragmented formlessness. The Real body-space thus becomes the locus to subtly situate logical time in this story. As Poe's description implies, the body that "within the space of a single minute, or even less, shrunk—crumbled—absolutely rotted away beneath my hands" is inextricably knotted with space and time. We come back to a moment in *Seminar XXI* in which Lacan melts logical time into space: "time is perhaps nothing other, precisely, than a succession of instants being pulled out [...] time is, it is perhaps that, finally, the trinities of space; what emerges there from a squeezing without remedy" (session of 11.12.1973). This dissolution of time into space has to be counterpointed with any notion of time-space coordinate. Moreover, we can spot the Borromean figure of squeezing in this passage. Lacan here subordinates logical time to the three dimensions of space that lead us to the squeezed point in the knot. This is the point of Valdemar's body as dead matter. The unnamable Real body is produced due to a hypnotic arresting of time that stops chronology and makes time logical in a subjective sense. Like the tube we saw forming while the torus is cut and turned inside out, this is a Real body that does not stay forever. It is fragmented and transitional. It appears but only to disappear. In fact, in Valdemar's case, this is the final remainder of the body, soon to melt into thin air. Once the hypnotism is taken out, what remains as corporeal space of a dead Real matter is the ruins of the body as logical space. This putrid liquid hardly occupies the space that the solid body of Valdemar would. The carrion is thus body turned inside out. This body-space is homologous to a chronological time that was squeezed into a zero-point earlier. The *chronos* that had burst out, bursts back in, but, not by way of temporality. It comes back in and through space. This is time's becoming into space. The logic of time speaks in to a logical space of death here.

The radical decomposition of the body makes the latent, patent, i.e., the body does not simply occupy space; body is space. It is a space from which dead matter reveals itself in an expression that is impossible to be captured through the Symbolic order. Ironically, this is a body that ceases to exist as body and becomes pure space. Does this space have a being? I would argue that this is a space of holes. As the body bursts, what is left is a Real locus, teeming with hollows. It does not have an affirmative existential value more than a hole. The body as a porous entity melts

into a space that is suspended between embodied and disembodied loci. Death as a signature of Real non-knowledge is key to this figuration wherein the unnamable remains of a body situate logical space as a homology of logical time. This is also a space of absolute stasis as deathly immobility dwells here. Lacan in *Seminar XXIII*, is more than aware of this Real aspect of death: “this imponderable is death, whose real grounding is that it cannot be pondered” (106). The Real of death is not only the unthinkable or the inexpressible, it is also a Real aspect of bodily transformation as it turns into dead matter. It is this movement that makes it an incarnation of Real logical space. As Valdemar’s decomposition into uncountable but fragmented corporeal matter indicates, logical space is nothing uniform or singular. Its logic is one of hollows, tensions and fragmentary multiplicity.

To conclude, what I have done in this article is to foreground space as a logical incarnation of the Real in Lacan’s reading of Poe’s “The Purloined Letter.” I have established a connection between this static spatiality and Lacan’s multiple evocations of a Real logical space in the later seminars. We have seen how the topological space of the Borromean chain that dissolves the distinction of inside and outside formalizes a Real logical space of the point as hole with zero-dimensionality. As opposed to the Euclidean space of point-line-surface, this is a space of points that lead to further points. These points are holes and vice versa. Building on this, I have zoomed in on Lacan’s late thoughts on the structure of the human body as Real space, rather than simply an item that occupies Cartesian space. I have then taken this corporeal space of hole-points through yet another Poe story on Valdemar’s hypnotized state between life and death, and his subsequent liquefaction once the hypnotic spell is withdrawn. My reading has situated the Real logical space of the body as a parallel to Lacan’s notion of logical time. This is a Real corporeal space that becomes an inscription of the movement from chronological to logical time and vice versa. This Real space bores holes into ontology by remaining grounded in a hole-point that defies positive existential status. Death as a perennial figure of the unknowable adds to the Real of the situation as we see the deathly transformation of corporeal space.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the peer reviewers and the editors, Sigi Jöttkandt and Dominiek Hoens, for their careful reading and robust suggestions that significantly helped this essay in the process of revision.

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