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Bewilderment and Suspension Bridges: The Joke as Symptom of Language

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According to the *Executive's Handbook of Humor for Speakers*, "The speaker on serious themes, who's going to use humor to help him pace, lighten and highlight his talk, has got to take that as another fundamental—he's got to be sure his humor never overwhelms his subject. Humor is an adjunct—an aid. It's Worcestershire sauce and good, sharp mustard. It's never the meat and potatoes!"¹ What stands out in this reading of the aim of humor is its dramatic opposition to the way in which humor is deployed by Lacan. Not only do jokes not help Lacan lighten and highlight his talk, but it also seems as if he deliberately employs them in order to confuse and confound the reader. Whereas a more conventional author or presenter explains the major point that she has been developing, Lacan almost never concludes his discourses without a decisively non-illuminating joke or comic twist. The result is rarely "satisfying" in any standard sense of the word.

Of course, Lacan was quite conscious of the confusion he created. Indeed, he offers one

of the clearest indications of his intentions during a visit to the United States to give a talk at the celebrated Johns Hopkins colloquium on structuralism (1966):

Somebody spent some time this afternoon trying to convince me that it would surely not be a pleasure for an English-speaking audience to listen to my bad accent and that for me to speak in English would constitute a risk for what one might call the transmission of my message. Truly, for me it is a great case of conscience, because to do otherwise would be absolutely contrary to my own concept of the message: of the message as I will explain it to you, of the linguistic message.... The message, our message, in all cases comes from the Other by which I understand 'from the place of the Other'... Since in this case, here in Baltimore, it would seem that the Other is naturally English-speaking, it would really be doing myself violence to speak French. But the question that this person raised, that it would perhaps be difficult and even a little ridiculous for me to speak English, is an important argument and I also know that there are many French-speaking people present that do not understand English at all; for these my choice of English would be a security, but perhaps I would not wish

them to be so secure and in
this case I shall speak a little
French as well. 2

In classic Lacanian style, we find ourselves between two irreconcilable positions: on the one hand, Lacan claims that despite the “dangers” of doing so, he will insist on attempting to transmit his message; on the other hand, this process will involve a highly elliptical and abstruse style at odds with a straightforward presentation of his thinking. He also indicates that his audience would feel less confused and more secure if he spoke a language that they could not understand. Lacan jokes with us in his accentuation of this impasse. In order to provide a gloss of this passage, I contend, we can draw upon Freud's description of the joke to conceive of Lacan's discourse in terms of a very specific form of confusion, namely, its “bewilderment and illumination.” This interpretation does not require a dismissal of Lacan and his penchant for parabolic and hyperbolic presentation. Rather, it requires that we simply approach his style by accepting it on its own terms. The key aspect of Lacan's style is its humor, and this derives from the tension between, on the one hand, the rigor with which Lacan insists that it is his ethical duty to transmit his message and, on the other, the disturbance and provocation that this ethical injunction requires, one which confounds the audience more than if he were speaking a foreign language. Lacan recognizes a common complaint directed against him by hapless scholars confused by his style of presentation: we often quit his talks feeling like we had knowledge taken from us; or, to translate this notion into the language of jokes: we would have understood more about that talk if we never had heard it!

At this point we might ask of Lacan: why not just say what you mean? If we can with some difficulty translate your obscure prose into conventional thinking, then why not articulate your thinking in more accessible terms? The joke provides an answer to this objection. As Freud discovers in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, the joke is irreducible to its translation into ordinary language: that is, a joke is irreducible to the idea that it expresses in humorous form. For example, in the case of a joke meant to insult another individual (what Freud calls a tendentious joke), we could always simply express our anger in a direct way to this individual. Yet there are two things to take note of in considering why this generally does not take place: first, cultural norms generally prohibit such behavior; and second, there is simply something “extra” we obtain through presenting an idea in a joking form. This is what Freud calls “incentive bonus” in the jokes book, and it explains exactly why Lacan is unwilling to translate his thoughts into a conventional essay form.

In this sense, we always have to take into consideration that the status of Lacan’s work keeps a close proximity to the functioning of the joke (as well as to the unconscious, as any subject can never translate her unconscious directly into ordinary language). He indicates on a number of occasions that when he teaches, he occupies the position of the analysand, namely, the position of the one who speaks in the analytic session. As the teacher qua analysand, he identifies with the impossibility of an analysand directly “stating” his problems in ordinary language. Even if someone were to attempt to

rationally address their symptoms in the analytic session, it would be the unintentional slips, humorous errors, and illogical gaps in the narrative that the analyst was scrutinizing, not the intentional meaning. Analysis is literally nothing less than reading this ineffable extra that we always add to our discourse. In short, analysis takes place, like the joke, in the (non-)language of “incentive bonus,” not in ordinary speech. This is what late Lacan means by *sinthome*: an irreducible excess within the symbolic that can never be smoothed over. In this sense, the psychoanalytic notion of the interpretation of the symptom is homologous to the explanation of the joke. Both aim at removing an absurdity, at explaining away a bizarre, even uncomfortable excess. The wager of the late Lacan is that there is something that cannot be explained about a symptom, that can never be alleviated and covered up, and the name Lacan gives to this is *sinthome*. We should be sure and recognize that this shift is not prescriptive but that it is descriptive. That is, Lacan is not claiming that we should not explain a symptom away, that it is bad analytic practice; he is saying that this is impossible, that we can never completely dominate the nonsense produced by the symbolic. This is what Lacan means when he says that “there is no metalanguage,” and it is exactly why the joke, the comic effect of the inconsistency of the symbolic, can never be completely explained away. Even if we wanted to do so, we could never completely explain why a joke is funny; it is an impossibility which assures that we can never eliminate jokes from language. They are language’s symptom, a timeless product of the deadlock of the symbolic.

One result of this splitting or interminable inconsistency in the symbolic is that there are two aspects of the joke: its symbolic and its real aspects. There are, on the one hand, the specific linguistic (or symbolic) techniques that function to create jokes; and there is, on the other hand, the irreducible gap within the symbolic that these techniques reveal, the gap that is homologous to the notion of the *sinthome*. That is to say, the real shows itself in the symbolic only through specific techniques that occur wholly within the symbolic, techniques that reveal the real to be precisely the inconsistency of the symbolic, its failure to coincide with itself or to complete itself. One manifestation of this is the double-faced nature of jokes (the irreducible tension between the form and the content); another is the double-faced nature of the analytic session, in which it necessarily takes two individuals to produce transference. The identification with this impasse is nothing short of the acceptance of the irreconcilability that this gap in the symbolic introduces into the subject: in contrast to the confused talk of the death drive as a wish for death or a tendency toward the inanimate, for Lacan the death drive actually implies a hyperbolic disjunction within meaning, not a tendency toward an earlier stage before language. But this disjunction is, to put it in Derridean terms, not merely a condition of impossibility.

As a result of what Derrida calls the logocentrism of the philosophical tradition, the importance of this inadequation for thought is generally ignored or downright scorned. This prejudice is also what confuses readers of Lacan. What critics (like Alan Sokal) who decry Lacan's

obscurantism fail to take into account is Lacan's unmatched skill at manipulating this gap in the symbolic; that is to say, Lacan understands that the necessary requisite of any strong argument is as much its actual argument as its uncanny incentive bonus, that aspect of the work which will live forever precisely because it ensures that we can never perfectly "master" it (for Lacan, the death drive would more properly be termed the undead drive, as it designates an infinite cycling that is structurally impossible to quell). In the case of notoriously difficult philosophers like Kant and Hegel, it is their difficulty that ensures the continuation of the academic enterprise that studies them: we still cannot even agree what it fundamentally "is" that these philosophers believe, and this is why we continue to study them. In fact, this inability to agree indicates that there is no rigorously delimitable "being" of a philosopher's work without this supplement: it would have long faded into obscurity without this inconsistency. If the classical goal of philosophy actualized itself, that is, if we reached a position of total enlightenment, this would also define the end of knowledge as such. "Thinking," in the strong Heideggerian sense, would disappear, precisely because the inherent anxiety of the unknown would disappear. This anxiety of the unknown can occur only through the proper mix of understanding and confusion.

This is why Lacan indicates in his Baltimore speech that, paradoxically, speaking a language someone understands can be more confusing and even anxiety inducing than speaking one they do not understand: total bewilderment is never threatening, whereas the notion that the words we hear tend towards a meaning which we fail to grasp is. As in the joke, we need both

“bewilderment” and “illumination” for thought, and it is the tension between these two that Lacan employs to induce anxiety, even a sense of hostility, into his audience.

This stance, of course, does not mean that Lacan is simply a sham. What is crucial is that a thinker must manage both aspects at once, to the extent that this is possible. It is the fact that Lacan *a/so* can be formalized and systematized that equally provides the basis for his canonization. This is precisely what is unacceptable to certain scholars about Lacanian studies. What confuses such critics of Lacan is not only that they fail to understand the notional content of what Lacan has to say; rather, it is also that they fail to grasp the epistemological shift announced by his unconventional prose. When people say they “do not get” Lacan, what they do not get is how Lacan alters the concept of “understanding” itself. Any understanding of the “content” of Lacan must coincide with a rigorous examination of the unique “form” in which it is delivered, one carefully crafted to emphasize this impossibility of reconciling the Lacanian body of thought.

This disjunction or splitting within the symbolic is also, of course, what creates the unconscious. As the inmixing of the Other into the subject, the unconscious implies that the subject is necessarily always-already implicated in the social due to its inaugural split. The division of the subject means both that the subject is not “equal” to itself, but also that this inequality is social in the sense that it occurs when we enter language, and language is never private as Wittgenstein notes. What we call the social is simply a by-product of the inability of the subject to master her discourse: sociality

means not only that we are always dependent on others, that we are never complete as a lone subject, but also that the social is a product of this very gap, that the Other is always-already inmixed in the subject and that the social is the product of this internal splitting of meaning within the subject. That is why the Other is, for Lacan, both the symbolic structure of norms and practices constituting a given social space, as well as the subject's own unconscious. The necessarily social sharing of jokes, as well as the necessarily social nature of the analytic transference, are two results of this (we can never laugh alone, as Freud notes, nor can we analyze ourselves).

It is here that we confront how the joke stages the inherent sociality of the unconscious. In Freud's main work on social psychology, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), he states that individual and group psychoanalysis are, for all intents and purposes, virtually identical. Yet some of his most significant writings on social psychoanalysis appear in his earlier work *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), which contains a long section analyzing "Jokes as a Social Process." ³ As Freud notes: "no one can be content with having made a joke for himself alone." ⁴ The joke is noteworthy because—unlike the comic and humor—the joke requires at least three individuals. However, Freud adds, the second person may be entirely absent from the action—the fundamental social relation of the joke operates between a first person and a third person: while in so-called "tendentious" jokes a second person as object or butt of the joke is specifically designated as such for a third person, in all other varieties of jokes this second person is generally elided.

Even if there were only two individuals present, Freud notes that “this second person in the case of jokes does not correspond to the person who is the object, but to the third person...the psychical process in jokes is accomplished between the first person (the self) and the third (the outside person) and not, as in the case of the comic, between the self and the person who is the object.” ⁵ The joke represents a leap of sociality: from the joker (and her close associates) to the outsider—from one to three.

This strange, illogical counting separates the joke from the two other forms studied by Freud, the comic and humor. Unlike the comic and humor, the joke is explicitly social insofar as it requires at least one other person in order to be properly enjoyed. The joke exploits the tension between the unconscious and the conscious, allowing the individual to transgress repression (and the pleasure principle enforcing it) and bribing the pleasure principle with joking “fore-pleasure”: “In our waking health we make use of special artifices for allowing what is repressed to circumvent the resistances and for receiving it temporarily into our ego to the increase of our pleasure. Jokes and humour, and to some extent the comic in general, may be regarded in this light.” ⁶ In the joke book, Freud similarly argues that the non-sensical, illogical core of the joke constitutes its essence, and that the conscious façade is merely a means for allowing this essence to appear: “The psychogenesis of jokes has taught us that the pleasure in a joke is derived from play with words or from the liberation of nonsense; and that the meaning of the joke is merely intended to protect that pleasure from being done away with by criticism.” ⁷

The question of whether we laugh at the notional-content of the joke or at its joking envelope-form allows us to transcend the form/content binary and invites us, against the will of the pleasure principle and the bribery of that faculty, to laugh: “The thought seeks to wrap itself in a joke because in that way it recommends itself to our attention and can seem more significant and more valuable, but above all because this wrapping bribes our powers of criticism and confuses them.” ⁸ Beyond the duality of the particular method (envelope-form) used to direct conscious thought to a repressed idea and the repressed idea (notion-content) itself, there exists a minimal non-sensical kernel that is irreducible to the preceding two—the form or the content. The most “developed” form of the joke is the tendentious joke, whereby the joker aims at exposing a highly taboo or inappropriate meaning; but such meaning merely serves to retroactively buttress the initial “bewilderment” that spurred the hearer of a joke to attempt a rationalization of it. The essence of the joke, then, is not the derivation of an ultimate sense from its nonsense, but rather this movement or directionality of the joke, its actuation of the becoming-nonsense of sense.

The joke’s ability to supersede resistance indicates that in *Group Psychology*, written almost twenty years after *Jokes*, Freud arrives at a conception of analysis strikingly similar in form to the joke: both analysis and the joke are concerned not with strengthening the ego against the drives but with weakening or distracting the ego so that repressed material might break through resistances and shift the coordinates of the subject’s symbolic sphere. In *Jokes*, Freud also ventures to equate analytic success

with laughter in the patient: “Many of my neurotic patients who are under psychoanalytic treatment are regularly in the habit of confirming th[is] fact by a laugh when I have succeeded in giving a faithful picture of their hidden unconscious to their conscious perception; and they laugh even when the content of what is unveiled would by no means justify this.” ⁹ This enigmatic passage offers a startling challenge to ego psychology, a challenge that portends Lacan’s radical revision of psychoanalytic theory.

As Lacan points out in Seminar XI, the analyst deploys interpretation “to isolate in the subject a kernel, a *kern*, to use Freud’s own term, of nonsense.” ¹⁰ The analyst, like the joke, offers truth in the form of the half-said. In the discourse of the analyst, the position of agent is held by *objet petit à* - the motor of the psychoanalytic cure in its attempt to confront the subject with her debt to an irreducible foreign otherness qua *object petit a*. This object, as the object that coincides with its own lack, represents the formalization of this halfness of analytic truth: it is only through the object’s failure to be fully present to itself as object of the drive that *objet petit à* exists at all. The joke is nothing more than a flash that reminds the subject of *objet petit à* as the nonsensical core that structures the symbolic. The joke marks a fundamental libidinal excess at the heart of the symbolic. The purer the representation of this excess, the less the excess is subject to historical atrophy. This explains why the funniest jokes for Freud are those that he terms “nonsense jokes.” ¹¹ These jokes illustrate the “incompatibility-in-equation” at the heart of all jokes, for they hold no alternate “sensible” meaning. Freud reminds us that

ultimately, the latent “meaning” or “point” of a joke is subservient to its liberation of nonsense. Neither the joking-form nor the thought-content are the source of the joke’s pleasure: both form and content are means by which to distract the critical faculties and to permit enjoyment of nonsense.

The non-coincidence between the joke’s two parts, between signifier and signified, or the signifier and its place of enunciation, is what renders a joke funny. In the case of the latter, it is the presentation of a clever wordplay that is the basis for humor, as, for example, in the following famous joke, where Freud relates: a “poor lottery-agent boast[s] that the great Baron Rothschild has treated him quite as his equal—quite ‘famillionairely.’” ¹² Here, there is no special meaning represented. There is only a rather banal thought momentarily embellished through a confusion within the realm of the signifier. In the former case, as takes place in nonsense jokes, the humor emerges from the unbridgeable gap between the signifier and the signified. Unlike jokes employing wordplay, which utilize a gap within the order of the signifier in order to produce the illusion of significant meaning when none in fact is present, nonsense jokes exploit an irreducible gap between the order of the signifier and the order of the signified, thereby creating the illusion of a meaningful point to the joke, but in fact, producing none. Nonsense jokes collapse the two basic categories of joke techniques, conceptual jokes and wordplay jokes, into each other, for the pure lack of any proper meaning highlights the excess of the act of enunciation over the enunciated, as in the wordplay joke, although without providing any pretext of a sensical reference as in the case of “famillionaire.” While wordplay jokes

are also rooted in a form of senselessness, namely the exploitation of contingency in the realm of the signifier, nonsense jokes strike the hearer as particularly strange because they are difficult to translate into a particular signified. This is especially acute in the jokes Freud terms “idiocy masquerading as a joke,” which are completely opaque to any attempt at analytic dissection. Such jokes are remarkable for their historical resilience: because they do not require any cultural knowledge to understand their meaning (such as the minimal grasp of class relations in 19th century Europe still necessary to completely comprehend the “famillionaire” joke), they illustrate the excess of signifier over signified and the lack of a signified as the crux of all “joke-work.” The following passage, through its reduction of the joke to its most basic form, remains one of the funniest in the book:

A number of productions resembling jokes can be classed alongside of nonsense jokes. There is no appropriate name for them, but they might well be described as ‘idiocy masquerading as a joke.’ There are countless numbers of them, and I will only select two examples. ‘A man at the dinner table who was being handed fish dipped his two hands twice in the mayonnaise and then ran them through his hair. When his neighbor looked at him in astonishment, he seemed to notice his mistake and apologized: “I’m so sorry, I thought it was spinach.” Or: “Life is a suspension bridge,”

said one man. – “Why is that?” asked the other. – “How should I know?” was the reply.’ These jokes are not entirely without a purpose; they are a ‘take-in,’ and give the person who tells them a certain amount of pleasure in mis-leading and annoying his hearer. The latter then damps down his annoyance by determining to tell them himself later on. 13

Surprisingly, the most “advanced” form of joke, namely, the tendentious joke, which seems sophisticated because it requires cognitive complexity to unravel its obscene or aggressive intent, here encounters the apparently most contemptible and anti-intellectual form of the joke – idiocy masquerading as a joke. While the former illustrates a hostility or obscene intent toward a specific individual, the latter reveals the object of hostility to be (potentially) the hearer herself. They do not indicate anything specific to create this hostility (that is, they do not insult or harass someone about something specific), but rather reveal hostility itself as object of the joke. Unlike a tendentious joke, the idiocy jokes highlight the split in the symbolic in an irreducible form, one which is always potentially readable as hostility on the part of the teller. Yet if this is the reaction the hearer adopts, it is due only to the hearer herself: these jokes merely reveal an inherent structure of the symbolic, one which produces both the split in the Other and in the subject. The technique functions because, due to the absence of the second person, the hearer can always assume that they are secretly this person, whereas in fact these jokes reveal the absence of the

object as such. In Lacanian theory the name for this absent object is *objet petit à*. We might say that the “aim” and the “object” of the joke become confused here: while tendentious jokes have as their object a specific individual who is ridiculed in order to achieve their aim of conveying contentious humor, the idiocy jokes’ object becomes the missing object, and the aim that of presenting hostility as such. These jokes do not have a specific object of hostility, but present hostility *as object*—in the Lacanian sense of *objet petit à* as the object which the drive endlessly circles around. This separation of aim from object has a specific name in Lacanian theory: *sublimation*. In it, we see that *objet petit à* is not a specific attainable object, but rather the object that remains once any specific object in reality has been renounced, when the pure aim or directionality of the drive, its “tendency toward” without any specific positive object, appears: it is the structure of pure aim. In this sense, these jokes produce hostility as object qua missing positive object, because they seem to have the structure of a hostile intent without any specific target. Paradoxically, this object appears to the subject when the satisfaction derived from any specific “ontic” object becomes impossible: object and aim coincide only through the fallout of any specific positive object. Let us examine the stakes of a manifestation of this type of humor in more detail.

In the realm of experimental comedy, the presentation of hostility as object is best represented by Andy Kaufman. What is funny about Kaufman's performances is not that he enacts an elaborate façade to deceive the audience into disliking him, but rather, that he never reveals the deception,

thereby accepting the hatred of him that is evoked by his act. There are two ways in which Kaufman takes advantage of the fallout of the positive object of the joke. The first is that his performances confuse the second and the third persons of the jokes. Because the audience enters the performance with the expectations normally associated with the “third person,” they understandably feel anger when Kaufman irritates rather than entertains them, that is, when they become the object of the joke. Instead of enjoying a conventional and safe performance, the entire experience transforms into a manifestation of hostility for the enjoyment of a future audience (or future “third person”). Thus Andy Kaufman’s work is always funny in the future tense: we recognize it was very unfunny for everyone present at the time, and this heightens the enjoyment of all future observers. The second method through which the work functions is the confusion of the first and second persons: the performer necessarily also becomes the target of the audience’s hostility, inverting the traditional structure of the tendentious joke. His performances illustrate that in the case of tendentious jokes, it is the joker who is always potentially the butt of the joke because of the risk involved in the position of enunciator. By substituting the traditional first-third relation for a confusion within the first-second relation, Kaufman produces a particularly intense form of humor, one that also incorporates something of the sublime usually associated with tragedy: it emerges when we appreciate the sacrifice of humor made in the present for the sake of the future. Such heroic self-sacrifice for the sake of comedy also demonstrates how no particular “ontic” object can totally occupy the position of the pure object of comedy:

objet petit à. In this highly risky humor, there is always the danger that the hostility produced when a hearer assumes that they are this object will boomerang on the subject. Much of Kaufman's work is characterized by this danger. It is also an effect known to Freud and which finds expression in the following joke: "There is a witty and pugnacious journalist in Vienna, whose biting invective has repeatedly led to his being physically maltreated by the subjects of his attacks. On one occasion, when a fresh misdeed on the part of one of his habitual opponents was being discussed, somebody exclaimed: 'If X hears of this, he'll get his ears boxed again.'" [14](#) In another statement that underscores the minimal antagonistic character of all jokes, Freud reminds us that, strictly speaking, there is no such thing as a non-tendentious joke:

Only jests are non-tendentious—that is, serve solely the aim of producing pleasure. Jokes, even if the thought contained in them is non-tendentious, are in fact never non-tendentious. They pursue the second aim: to promote the thought by augmenting it and guarding it against criticisms. Here they are once again expressing their original nature by setting themselves up against an inhibiting and restricting power—which is now the critical judgment. This, the first use of jokes that goes beyond the production of pleasure, points the way to their further use. [15](#)

And hence we have come to the final indicator of the joke as beyond the pleasure principle. Perhaps in addition to "there's no such thing as the sexual relationship," we can add to the body of famous Lacanian slogans that "there's no such thing as a non-

tendentious joke,” or, even more radically, “there’s no such thing as a non-tendentious subject.”

The joke would serve, therefore, a therapeutic role akin to the analytic goal of eliminating the dialectic of desire through the production of a subject who accepts the radical disjunction or dissatisfaction in herself created by a missing “ontic” object of satisfaction. The joke, we can argue, is the inverse process of analysis. Rather than a silent analyst punctuating the discourse of the analysand in order to reveal the operation of the unconscious and its challenge to subjective mastery, a silent hearer has unconscious material dredged out through the discourse of another. The analysand/hearer as the “third person” is placed in the position of the Other, rather than the analyst/teller in the position of the Other as in the analytic session. This process reveals the tendentious core of the subject, one that is isolated through the retroactive positivization of the bewildering nonsense at the heart of the joke. While analysis isolates the kernel of nonsense in the subject, the joke isolates a kernel of nonsense within the Other, one which is the counterpart of the subject’s nonsensical core. Idiocy jokes are the purest form of this, insofar as they reveal that the apparent “object” of the hostility of the teller is not a specific presentable object, (in contrast to the normal expectation in the telling of jokes), but is the subject’s relation to the object as such, to the object as crack in the Other decompleting it: the structure of hostility is produced by the manner in which the subject *cannot avoid* interpreting this object as internal to themselves (as indeed it is). These jokes are also unusual because they expose the hearer to the risk that the

teller is generally exposed to: they also are held up as intimately sharing this ridiculous foreign object (a relationship Jacques-Alain Miller calls “extimacy”) instead of another individual or the joker herself. Rather than yielding a meaning in the field of the Other, they reveal a gap in it, a gap which is exitimately related to the subject herself.

And thus we see how the joke is “beyond the pleasure” principle. In its most simplified, ahistorical form, that of idiocy jokes, it forces the renunciation of a final signified in order to produce laughter. Its very laughter effect is its constitutive incompleteness, its lack of a satisfying meaning. This disruptive, decompleting element is Lacan’s “message from the Other” that he speaks of in the Baltimore speech. It is none other than *objet petit à* as the “bone in the throat” (in Zizekian-Hegelian language) of the Other. It is *objet petit à* as object of the drive, instead of a final “ontic” object, meaning, or construction that unlocks and eliminates symptoms. Death drive names for Lacan the insufficiency of any such final meaning of the subject: a Lacanian analyst, unlike other forms of analyst, isolates this kernel of nonsense for the subject rather than eliminating it. This is Lacan’s radical challenge to the traditions of depth psychology or ego psychology that has constituted so much of the Freudian legacy: the drive destroys all attempts to close the chain of signification and complete the unconscious, the discourse of the Other. For Lacan, death drive means that analysis cannot reveal to the subject the historical experience causing her symptoms, but rather can only reveal that these symptoms themselves are irreducible and intractable, an incompatibility at the very heart of the

Other, of the Other as intimately inmixed in the subject. The rationale for analysis is directly homologous to the need for some particular technique, such as the joke, to produce laughter. Analysis is needed because something cannot be simply “explained” to the subject in rational discourse, any more than a joke’s humor, its nonsensical core, can be “explained” through detailing its construction or providing its ostensible meaning. A minimal residue of performativity assures that neither a joke nor analysis can take place in strictly constative language. Lacan’s Baltimore speech indicates, we can now see, that when the analyst is forced into the position of analysand, that is, of the one who bears the injunction to speak, her goal is to show the inherent deadlock of this position through the refusal of straightforward discourse. The passage through analysis is thus akin to the assumption of the injunction to speak with the added requisite that the Other is inherently deadlocked: there is a nonsensical core that can never be converted into a final signifier of meaning, only a laugh at an intractable symptom of language.

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