

SECRET WEAPON*

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The waiting room opens onto a vestibule. The main door to the analyst's office is to the right on the near end of this vestibule, whose far end is created by a curtained-off doorway. Behind this doorway is the analyst's study. From his office, the analyst is able to enter this study directly, thanks to a second private office door which opens into it.

Taking advantage of a free hour that day, he busies himself in his office doing "I don't know what". When he hears someone calling his name from the study, through the private half-opened door separating his office from it, he encounters the big smile of one of his patients, almost an hour early for his appointment. The smile is met with surprise. Nevertheless, the analyst receives the analysand who begins to recount in detail one of his recent projects. A cartographer by profession, he has just finished plotting the geographical features of the territory of the foreign country he is mapping. It is a rural area bisected by mountainous terrain and adjacent, in part, to the sea.

The countryside and the animals that live there remind him of the story of a bet he had recently made during a visit to see one of his friends who owns a restaurant. At lunchtime this friend invites him to order anything he likes. Studying the menu, he selects the most expensive entree: pheasant. The friend, who is treating him to the meal, seems irritated by this expensive choice. The conversation becomes a bit tense, but the analysand continues to laugh and joke around. Before leaving the restaurant he tells his friend, "I'll bet that before the end of today you are going to invite me back to your restaurant and serve me pheasant again." Half annoyed, half amused, the friend replies, "Well, I'll take that bet, because I'm sure I won't invite you back for pheasant."

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The patient then goes to a gourmet shop and buys three pheasants. Later, he returns to his friend and offers him two of them, keeping the third in his bag. His friend, who really appreciates this gift, is warm and affectionate again. Just then the analyst takes the third pheasant out of his bag and says, "This one is my pheasant, and I would like you to cook it for me for tonight's dinner." Indeed, the story ends with a big pheasant dinner. To his analyst, (who, as he tells me, listens to him somewhat helplessly), he triumphantly points out that he won his bet.

If you bet, it is precisely because you know you can win, but the other side of this possible gain, of course, is possible loss. Risk itself is at stake here. What do we make, then, of a bet from which loss has been excluded?

This pheasant story is a hunting story; it concludes with a dinner which, to me, immediately evokes the image of a sacrificial or totemic banquet. The analyst responds to my remark by telling me that, indeed, it was as the result of a hunting accident in a foreign country that his patient had lost his son. This was the third death which had deeply marked his life, the first being his father's death when he was only a child, and the second being his paternal uncle's when he was an adolescent. For him, the only son of a family whose name he carries, the dead embody the destiny of the descendance.

I remark to the analyst that there are four pheasants involved, three plus the *one* that caused the bet. Indeed, it was because of unwarranted depression and sudden anxieties that the patient had decided to contact this analyst, having told him from the outset, with a sense of relief, that, anyhow, he knew he didn't have long to live: although perfectly healthy, he would die on such-and-such a date, in such-and-such a year, in the relatively near future.

If the bet is a wager with death, a sure way of winning is to know exactly when to expect it. Along with chance, such knowledge eliminates the unknown and cancels risk. Albeit not the fact that one dies anyway.

In the pheasant bet, victory entails paying a price, specifically the cost of the three pheasants. The analyst responds to this comment with a sudden association. Suddenly he remembers another of the patient's bets. As a child, during one of his father's illnesses, he was playing with a friend when his mother took him aside to tell him that his father had just died. After a long silence, he had gone back to his game, to bet with his friend who was ignorant of what had just happened, that his father had just died.

What had they wagered? Nothing, answers the analyst, but he had "won" anyway.

To place a bet whose outcome is known is swindling. However, we can wonder who, in our example, is the dupe. While knowledge is the precondition for swindling, it must be noted that the knowledge involved in our example strikes the subject in the form of a sudden fatality, of an external event to which the subject must submit.

Are betting to another's detriment, and swindling him out of the "nothing" achieved through a symbolic victory, one and the same? It is worth noting that whereas in the first case, the other is reduced, through his exploitation, to the status of the objects stolen from him, in the second the challenge bolsters a symbolic gain whose stakes are pure prestige. However, in the three wagers just mentioned, the one with the playmate, the one with the friend from the restaurant, and the one with death itself, the acquisition of prestige on the winner's part sanctions his own loss, and victory takes its toll. If the price to pay is indeed death – the father's, the son's, the family name's, his own – the bet in question seems like a ruse seeking to compensate the subject with a certain symbolic mastery when confronted with the eruption of the real. By means of his victories the subject reestablishes the coordinates of his field of action; he redefines the limits of his hold on reality. The victory does not counterbalance the loss, however. Rather it *returns the subject's loss to him, repeated and confirmed*, thanks to a change of level which, by making the person master of the game he is subject to, transforms the inescapable, incorporating it in the form of a law.

What is then, in these "innocent" bets, the function of the other, of the one who duped, through his challenge, loses only some nothing? If a bet is made in bad faith, if it is a perverse undertaking, the other,

exploited, manipulated and eventually ruined by the swindle, is recast in the role of waste product. To the contrary, in the case of the innocent bet/trick, the other from whom something is stolen is there to represent or embody the position of the *Loser*. He is there, basically, so that, thanks to the ruse of a bet whose outcome is known in advance, the role of dupe can be transferred onto him. A hostage in the hands of the victor, he becomes a metaphor of the former's destiny. He thereby frees the author of the ruse, by shouldering his truth. His function, unlike that of the waste product object for the pervert, is reminiscent of the function of the third party in wit as illustrated by Freud. This third party is "indispensable" if the witticism is to occur (Freud, 1905a, p.155). He functions as the medium through which the author of the witticism can discharge "by ricochet" ("on the rebound", 1905a, p.156) the pleasure accumulated in the very technique of the word work, the pleasure taken in play (*Spiellust*) or in lifting inhibitions (*Aufhebungslust*), which derives from the economy of a psychic effort heretofore expended by reason, critical judgment, repression.

This bet/innocent trick resembles a *Scherz*. Freud considers *Scherz* to be an intermediate category between play and jokes (1908, p.144) (1). Its characteristic, he stresses, is that it is not yet wholly suited and effective in its content, which is evidence that its substance derives from the gratuitous and pointless quality of play.

(1) Strachey translates the word *Scherz* as *jest* (Freud, 1905a, p.129). We choose to keep the German, for the noun *jest* does not convey the meanings of the original. *Scherz* (from the Lombard *skerzon*) is a commonly used German word which encompasses various meanings: puns, spoonerisms, practical jokes, dirty tricks, etc., which have in common a playful, non-sensical quality. As Freud points out, unlike witticisms they are not "intellectually successful", and do not necessarily provoke laughter. Freud's examples of *Scherz* in [Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious](#) are puns. Yet we prefer not to translate *Scherz* as *pun* because what characterizes the notion of *Scherz* is precisely the fact that it can be both a practical and a linguistic joke. It is also worth noting, once again, that Strachey's translation of *jokes* for *Witz* is inappropriate. In this case there exist better English terms, *witticism* and *wit*.

The fact that the bet of the father's death, inscribed as it is in a childish game, resembles a *Scherz* made in bad taste, does not detract from its

enigmatic nature, from that aspect of surprise which also characterizes the *Scherz* involving the pheasants. Indeed, this incomprehensible quality, this absurdity which leaves us amazed, points to how, here, something "tightens", to use Lacan's expression (1975), in the sphere of the symbolic, entailing the abolition of meaning. This contraction, this "no-sense" is precisely what turns the *Scherz* into a kind of interpretation.

The third party of the witticism benefits from his position as essential medium. To use Freud's expression, he "buys" his pleasure without spending. He receives it "as a present" (Freud, 1905a, p.148). In the bet/innocent trick, on the contrary, the gift the other finds himself holding is an absence of harm, the advantage of having engaged in a confrontation strictly limited to prestige, where he lost without having to pay a price. Having embodied the being of the loser, his profit amounts to the subtraction of a supposed real loss, which produces the relief required by the *Scherz*. This pheasant banquet is a relaxed banquet where reestablished friendship is celebrated in laughter. Because he can symbolically confirm his loser's dignity without having anything real to lose, the other in the innocent bet, although aware of being tricked, is nevertheless able to maintain his narcissistic integrity in the face of attack.

Although this type of harmless *Scherz* is less likely to provoke laughter than surprise, its author derives from it a satisfaction which verges on irony. This half laugh or internal smile of victory is a response, through a ruse, to the discovery of the inescapable. Faced with the inconceivable quality of the event, his father's death, or his son's, faced with the groundswell which suddenly undermines him, he finds a way to stem the tidal wave of the real, and regain his footing on firm ground, so to speak. Like a good magician, he transforms tears into smiles; he turns a sudden, unbearable knowledge, something impossible to contemplate, into the very wellspring of his accomplishment as a bettor.

This art of symbolic appropriation, this technique of the good magician, brings to mind little Hans'

laughter when he sees his sister's genitals, a laugh which spares the speaking being, as Claude Rabant has noted, "from choking with emotion" (1990, p.116). In this sudden abeyance, in this contraction of thought, the laugh signals the actual "crash" of knowledge in the face of the inconceivable – in this case inconceivable sexual difference. Laughter is tantamount to a "naturally false" response – "*ist natürlich ein falsche*", as Freud puts it (1905b, p.257) – but which, nevertheless, shows, for the first time in Hans' life, "the recognition of sexual difference".

Hans, proponent of infantile sexual theories, theoretician of the difference between the animate and the inanimate, Hans, philosopher of compromise at the time of his sister's birth ("her widdler will get bigger", he asserts) ends up laughing. This laughter, this emptying of meaning, punctuates the appearance of the antinomy, of the *gap* separating experience and theory. This laughter sanctions the momentary surrender of theory, the oscillation of the myth, of the boundary needed by the subject to protect himself in the face of the unthinkable. If, as Freud claims, laughter signals a recognition, it is because it reveals, in the antinomy, the affirmation of the law – the assumption, as it were, of sexual difference, of the prohibition against incest. The subject needs this law, which sanctions loss, to grant status to his desire, since, as Lacan points out, one can only desire according to the law (Lacan, 1959–60).

Laughter concludes a chapter in Hans' story. The following chapter introduces phobia. A construct, a barricade now becomes needed to reestablish the boundary threatened by the antinomy, by the appearance of a gap. A barrier is drawn to separate, according to the assumption of the law, the subject from the object of desire, to make the phobic object that signifier which compensates for the "lack in the Other" (Lacan, 1966, p.610). But if laughter, in Hans' story, punctuates the transition to phobia, it is because, in a certain sense, it trumpets the arrival of phobia: it already contains phobia. As a bulwark in the event of the real, as a technique of tightening the symbolic, this laughter demonstrates its congruence with the strategy of phobia.

Faced with the unthinkable, laughter or the innocent bet is triggered in order to wrest from anxiety what Lacan calls its "horrible certainty" (1962). It is so that there may be a *transfer of certainty* that thought and action invent their ruses within a field riven by the emergence of anxiety. Through trickery the harmless bet restores the subject's knowledge in the form of a confirmation which displaces the unbearable quality of certainty. This confirmation, moreover, is the *re-establishment* of a theory, *of the very theory of the bet*, it is the re-establishment of a replay, of a boundary which acts as an obstacle against the real. In the ultimate bet, the one with death, theory creates a boundary in time and space – on such-and-such a day, in such-and-such a year. Theory becomes the very boundary of life. It is thus that the laugh, the secret smile of symbolic appropriation demonstrates, along with the recognition of the law, the very possibility of its repression.

One can therefore see how, in the innocent bet, this knowledge which avoids chance and sustains the myth of a knowledge that fully knows itself, by recasting the limits of the possible, designs a strategy analogous to phobia's. Whereas the pervert would accept along with the bet, honest or not, chance and the risk of losing, convinced as he is of winning *in any event*, the phobic finds himself *forced to trick* – his reply is naturally false, Freud says. He finds himself forced to *maintain the falseness* of theory in order to border the real, to circumscribe with his thought the scope of reality and establish an ethic through his fear.

To return to our initial example: the analyst is doing "I don't know what" when he is surprised by his patient's arrival one hour in advance of his appointment, surprised by the smile that greets him through the back door of his office. The big smile which stifles a laugh punctuates the *Scherz*, the ruse with which he "catches" the analyst by overturning the rules of the game in which he is engaged, those groundrules which require that he respect the ritual of analysis. This time it is the analyst who embodies the loser, a position he confirms moreover by neglecting to make his patient pay for the following session, the appointed one, canceled by this premature appearance.

A loss, then, takes place, makes place. The smile punctuates the presence of a threshold inside the analytical space, the wall, the door which separates the office from the study. Once again, the ruse signals

the weight of knowledge, this time of the cartographer's knowledge as he ventures into the other's territory. In fact nothing prevented him, no sign forbade this exploration, other than the ritual of the analyst's route and that implicit convention which makes us respect the privacy of others. But, after he had stepped through the curtained door and entered the study – that domain of the Other's knowledge – after he had discovered the topographical features of the place, the weight of a transgression crystallizes within the bared frame. It is then that the dividing line between the office and the study reveals the consistency of a barrier cutting across the space of analysis. While the ruse restores to the subject the fruit of his transgression in the form of an innocent *Scherz*, it nonetheless marks the emergence of an obstacle bearing witness to prohibition itself. By giving a symbolic status to this imaginary threshold which borders the real, the joking smile sanctions the event of a loss. It is evident that the appearance of this boundary actualizes within analytical space the restoration of the "site of phobia" (Finzi Ghizi, 1981, p.26), of that barrier which separates the subject from the object of his desire. This is a line of defense, I might add, with which the subject does not respond to anxiety, but *with* anxiety, to the event of the real.

I shall conclude with an anecdote about a phobic five year-old girl. During one of her visits to the analyst, she invents the following game: she is fond of red and golden glass beads. She asks the analyst to close his eyes while she hides them. He will later have to look for them. She places the beads under the analyst's chair, but when he opens his eyes she tells him, "Look under the sofa cushions, I hid the beads there." She runs to the sofa, lifts the cushions and shows him this "absence", as she laughs. That is when she adds, "Don't look under your chair, because there's something very, very dangerous under there."

Everything is known in this game where the analyst is the dupe of the little girl who cannot help but be insincere, in this game, which, in turn, is the very metaphor of the certainty it tries to grasp, to displace. Not only does the wished for object become the one that is fraught with danger; it is also manifested in proximity to the analyst's body. Thus is the frame bared to show the symptom's design. By staging the law of desire, the game shifts desire's weight onto the analyst, and laughter signals, along with the confirmation of this law, the very possibility of its being forgotten.

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