

A wit is not just a wit

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Every theoretical production formulated about humour and laugh has suffered visible transformations. Comedy as it was thought some years ago, poses nowadays a strange and difficult lecture. However we can find the element “denounce” in many humorous works. Humour has the ability to denounce power, social habits, moral and aesthetics and allows us to talk about almost everything from an omnipotent position to denunciate what we know about the Other.

However what is humour? What is the comic? Is humour a general category in literature? What is wit? Is it a subcategory inside the humor or inside the comic? Freud was concerned about these questions and in his book *Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious*¹; he points out essential differences among such many categories.

In Psychoanalysis, *Der Witz* or the wit was a despised concept during many years. It was not until Jacques Lacan rescued it that the concept was raised to a dignified category. He considers *Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious*, *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, and *Interpretation of Dreams* canons. Hence the wits, as well as the lapses and the dreams become an incontestable manifestation of the unconscious.

There is problem originated in the translation from German into English, French, Spanish and Portuguese. That being that the German word “Witz” means both joke and spirit. James Strachey translated *Witz* as *joke*², which sense includes from jest, fun to anecdote or mockery. On the other hand *wit* has a restricted meaning: especially in ordinary English, wit refers to an intellectual kind of joke. In his 1916 translation into English, Abraham Arden Brill selected *wit*³ as the best choice. Wit converges a broader sense of inventiveness, cleverness and perceptiveness but loses in wideness. In French, *Witz* has been translated as *mot d’esprit* despite Lacan used *Trait d’esprit*. *Chiste* is the word that has been used in Portuguese and Spanish.

In Psychoanalysis, wits along with dreams, lapses and symptoms are ways the unconscious manifests itself. Dreams and symptoms are characterized by the condensation process. They are examples of the metaphorical mechanism, as

¹ Sigmund Freud. “Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious” in *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*. Translated and edited by Dr. A. A. Brill. New York: The Modern Library, 1995. Hereafter cited as *Wit*.

² Sigmund Freud. *Jokes and Their relation to the Unconscious*. Translated and edited by James Strachey. New York/London: 1989. Hereafter cited as *Jokes*.

³ See preface of James Strachey to the Brazilian edition *Os Chistes e Sua Relação Com o Inconsciente in Edição Standard Brasileira* of Editora Imago and *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud* (Translated and edited by Dr. A. A. Brill). New York: The Modern Library, 1995. The Brazilian poet Haroldo de Campos discusses this matter in his article “O Afreudisiaco Lacan na Galáxia de Lalingua” in *Idéias de Lacan*, n 2. São Paulo: Iluminuras, 1995. p. 192.

Lacan would have said, a signifier substitution. The lapses and slips of the tongue can find a particular way through the displacement, mainly in a relation of contiguity in psychoanalysis. On the other hand, wit has the advantage to add the metonymic displacement and metaphorical condensation.

Wit has to follow a metonymic chain and then be in a metaphorical chain. In other words it has to submit itself to the code and hence modify it.

We don't have a wit if the source and the receiver don't recognize the new meaning as a message that can be understood by both of them. Dreams, in a social context, are a solitary process. Lapses can be understood as a mistake in social life, but the wit surfaces in front of someone and needs this someone in order to exist.

Not only wits are a social tie but also they are a product of the unconscious in social life. They need the code's signifiers and provide new signifiers to the code.

The Laugh: the Humour and the Comic

Laugh is a common denominator for several comics and humorous phenomena. Several authors have studied it in its several aspects. There is an extensive literature on laugh, the comic and humour. We can mention Bergson, and the comic process; Vladímir Propp and the cynical, ritual and mocking laugh. Mikhail Bakhtin through the Rabelais context studied a particular way of communication as well as the hierarchical social inversions.

Freud in *Wit* observes the humour and the comic through the jokes. He pays attention in the psychical mechanisms and psychogenesis of wits. In general, the notion of comic goes from a special category, "the comic", (where humour and wit belong) to a kind of category with defined and independent characteristics. In other words, a work can have several wits and still humour. At the same time, "the comic" can exist as a distinct category.

To Bergson, anecdotes originate from old pleasures and games from childhood, whereas to Freud they also come from suffering and the death drive. To Freud, humor is a way to obtain pleasure despite the pain. Pain is distanced to acquire a humorous pleasure and the gain of this investment is "an economy in expenditure in feeling".

It is essential that the problem be distanced from the cause of the suffering. In 1905, Freud concluded that: "It has seemed to us that the pleasure of wit originates from an economy of expenditure in inhibition, of the comic from an economy of

expenditure in thought, and of humor from an economy of expenditure in feeling”.⁴

And about psychical localization:

“On the whole, humor is closer to the comic than wit. Like the former its psychic localization is in the foreconscious, whereas wit, as we had to assume, is formed as a compromise between the unconscious and the foreconscious”⁵

In 1927 he writes the article “The Humour” where he maintains the economy of feeling, although he states that humour is localized in the superego. James Strachey notes that for the first time the superego is presented in a state of a friendly spirit.

The humorous process can happen with the subject with himself. The important point is the existence of an emotional expectation that is transformed by the humour, and the feeling is saved and transformed in pleasure. Freud still adds that there is something of greatness and elevation, in humour, that both the wit and the comic lack.

Ferenczi considers even the black humour, the great potential of humour, a superegoic palliative for the misfortunes of reality. To Freud humour represents the triumph of ego, but it is not a resigned one since it also represents the pleasure principle, in other words, it is a rebel. There is a rejection of the reality by the superego in profit of an illusion. Lacan states in *Kant with Sade* that “humor is betrayer (*transfuge*) in the comic of the very function of the super-ego”⁶

2. Half Laugh: the irony.

Irony is defined as a fine and dissimulated said used by Socrate (through Plato) to point out the pseudo truth. Vladimir Jankélévitch, in *L'Ironie*⁷ describes the formation of the ironic conscious since the sophists and notes that the Socratic irony contested only the utility and the certitude of the natural science whereas the romantic irony contested the very existence of nature. On the art of “slightly offending” and “do not get too deep in the matter”: *effleurer*, the ironic does not intend to be deep because “(...) *la conscience ironique ne desire pas êtreindre: elle préfère papillonner d'anecdote en anecdote, de plaisir en plaisir, et goûter de tout sans se poser nulle part.*

⁴ *Wit*. p. 771. By James Strachey: “The pleasure in jokes has seemed to us to arise from an economy in expenditure upon inhibition, the pleasure in the comic from an economy in expenditure upon ideation (upon catexis) and the pleasure in humour from an economy in expenditure upon feeling.”⁴ *Jokes*. p. 293.

⁵ *Wit*. p. 770. By Strachey: “On the whole humour is closer to the comic than to jokes. It shares with the former its psychical localization in the preconscious, whereas jokes, as we have had to suppose, are formed as a compromise between the unconscious and the preconscious.” *Jokes*. p. 290.

⁶ Jacques Lacan. *Kant with Sade*. Translated by James B. Swenson, Jr. p. 58.

⁷ Vladimir Jankélévitch. *L'Ironie*. Paris: Flammarion, 1964. Hereafter is cited as *L'Ironie*.

In addition to the references in Philosophy, Jankélévitch uses his musical culture to explore the ironic trace of Erick Satie, Debussy e Mompou, showing us their “laconism” (*brachylogie*)⁸, lacune that fullfill our imagination, our emptiness, seducing us with the power of the dream. According to Jankélévitch, there is a renounce to the exhaustive and to the enumeration. Even because it is not sufficient to define irony, as usual, as “simulation by the opposite”.

Through irony one can free oneself from the ambition of power, the blindly respect to daily life, the pedantism of science, the political manifestation: “*Douce ironie!*” According to Jankélévitch, irony is not hostile to the loving spirit and simplicity. It is necessary to be lucid, but mainly direct, and to do simple things on a simple way.

The work of Jankélévitch has the quality of lifting irony to a category that goes beyond a simple inversion or “representation by the opposite”, as Freud says, about the “ironic wits”. To Freud, irony consists on saying the opposite to what it is meant in a way that the receiver understands the meaning by the tone of voice or by the inversion or other “indication of the style”. This method provides an alternative way that allows the subject a detour from the difficulties of the straight ways that could be offensive. The receiver, in this case, stays on the limbo, with a half laugh, while trying to decide if there is an ironic intention.

Freud points to a possible distinction of the phenomena, such as the comic, the irony (as a comic variation) and the wit. The distinction is based on the libidinal economy and the psychic localization.

3. THE LAUGHTER: The Wit

The wit, or spirit, is a point of theoretic reflection that dates from early times. Cicero, in *Do Orador*, asks himself about the sources of the spirit. Summarizing, to mock the expectations of the listener, to ridicule the imperfection of others, to make fun, on occasions, of ones own imperfections, to use caricatures or irony, to stand out the stupidity of the other, those are the ways to provoke laughter.

According to Robert Escarpit, humour is the son of *wit*. He does not translate *wit* to French because *Wit*, is to him the English way of this spirit of intellectual or formal search that took place in Europe during the 16th. and 17th. centuries⁹.

⁸ *L'Ironie*: “Le silence, la reticence et l’allusion composent à la ironie un visage bien à part. L’ironie est laconique. L’ironie est discontinue. Concise d’abord. L’ironie est une brachylogie”. p.91.

⁹ Robert Escarpit. “L’humour” in *Que Sait Je?* Paris: PUF, 1960.

Within Romanticism, David Hartley¹⁰ (1705-1757), in his theories on humor, cites *wit*, but does not specify the term and uses the expression *wit and humor* together along his texts. He describes the relief of tension that adults achieve through a skill learned during childhood and practiced in games that use allusions, contrasts, and coincidences among other mechanisms. However, he mentions the wit as a way to provoke laughter without really specifying how it works. William Hazlitt, in 1819, in “*On Wit and Humor*” makes a small distinction between *wit*, spirit or jokes and humor:

*: The illustrating and heightening the sense of that absurdity by some sudden and unexpected likeness or opposition of one thing to another, which sets off the quality we laugh at or despise in a still more contemptible or striking point of view. Wit, as distinguished from poetry, is the imagination or fancy inverted, and so applied to given objects, as to make the little look less, the mean more light and worthless; or to divert our admiration or wean our affections from that which is lofty and impressive, instead of producing a more intense admiration and exalted passion, as poetry does. Wit may sometimes, indeed, be shown in compliments as well as satire;... (...)*¹¹

Trying to discriminate the following:

Humor is describing the ludicrous as it is in itself; wit is the exposing it, by comparing or contrasting it with something else. Humor is, as it were, the growth of nature and accident; wit is the product of art and fancy.

In German *Witz* finds in Goethe its “creative blow” as well as it is found in Novalis and Schlegel fragments. Wit in German is related to “intelligence”, “geniality”, “wisdom” also “dignity” and “freedom” since its etymology.¹²

Those fragments of romanticism, it is good to remember, found a special shape in the brevity of wits. Nevertheless wit has had different shapes and values in time. It has changed according to culture and language. Hence, the concept of the spirit in early times was different from the concept during the middle age and the enlightenment. Neither it is the same in France, Germany, U.S.A. nor in Brazil, where especially all humour forms are a joke.

When Freud chooses *Witz* in spite of *Scherz*, *Humor* or *Anekdote* he chooses something like a spirituous game of words. In Lacanian meaning: a spirituous game with signifiers. It was very clear to Freud that wits have specific techniques, motives, psychogenesis and mechanisms different from the comic and humor, to clarify the unconscious.

¹⁰ David Hartley, “*Of Wit and Humour*” in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humour*, Org. by John Morreall. New York: SUNY Press, 1987. p. 41 a 44.

¹¹ William Hazlitt, “*On Wit and Humor*” in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*. Org. By John Morreall. New York: 1987. p. 74.

¹² *Wissen, Verstand, Klugheit, Weisheit*, are signifiers to translate the origin of *Witz* in Mackensen, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der Deutschen Sprache*. p.55. Every signifier can be translated by, “intelligence”, “cleverness” and “wisdom”.

For this reason Freud remembers known authors that wrote about laugh such as Jean Paul, Theodor Vischer, Kuno Fischer, Theodor Lipps, Kraepelin and Kant. He cites examples of Shakespeare and Heinrich Heine. He uses these people to speak about brevity, ambiguities and contrasts of ideas provoked by the sense and the nonsense.

Freud introduces his ideas through the following wit:

“(...) Hirsch-Hyacinth, the Hamburg lottery agent and curer of corns, who, boasting to the poet of his relationship with the rich Baron Rothschild, ends thus: ‘And as true as I pray that the Lord may grant me all good things, I sat next to Salomon Rothschild, who treat me just as if were his equal, quite *famillionaire*’.”¹³

This wit is formed by a condensation accompanied by the formation of the substitute and thus the formation of a new word (neologism). Freud uses many other examples:

Non tutti, ma buona parte, said an Italian lady pointing to a tactless remark made by the first Napoleon: *Tutti gli Italiani danzano si male*.¹⁴ The wit depending on sound was cited by Freud as a *Klangwitz*. A sound-wit is formed by the multiple use of the same word, as the following example shows, where the sonorous similarity provokes the proverb: *Traduttore — Tadtore!*¹⁵

Freud begins to track the psychogenesis of wits through the tendentious wits whose enjoyment consists in the suspension of suppression and repression (*refoulement*). During the course of its development, the wit maintains its essential characteristic:

“It begins as play in order to obtain pleasure from the free use of the words and thoughts. As soon as the growing reason forbids this senseless play with words and thoughts, it turns to the jest or joke in order to hold to these sources of pleasure and in order to be able to gain new pleasure from the liberation of the absurd. In the role of harmless wit it assists the thoughts and fortifies them against the impugment of the critical judgment, whereby it makes use of the principle of intermingling the pleasure-sources. Finally, it enters into the great struggling suppressed tendencies in order to remove inner inhibitions in accordance with principle of fore-pleasure. Reason, critical, judgement, and suppression, these are the forces, which it combats in turn. It firmly holds on the original word-pleasure

¹³ *Wit*, p. 607. James Strachey translated to: “Heine introduces the delightful figure of the lottery agent and extractor of corns, Hirsch-Hyacinth of Hamburg, who boasts to the poet of his relations with the wealthy Baron Rothschild, and finally says: ‘And, as true as God shall grant me all good things, Doctor, I sat beside Salomon Rothschild and he treated me quite as his equal – quite “famillionairely”’. *Jokes*. p14.

¹⁴ *Wit*. p. 615.

¹⁵ *Wit*. p. 617.

sources, and beginning with the stage of the jest opens for itself new pleasure sources by removing inhibition.”¹⁶

Freud studies the motives of wit along with its social process concerning its communicational process. Therefore he employs the differences among the comic, humor and wit and the number of persons involved in this communicational process.

When someone slips in a peel of banana we can laugh at this tragic accident. When we see someone very tall with someone very short we can also laugh. We laugh when something changes the natural order of events and crashes the harmony. But we can laugh alone and nothing alters the funny side. Another person can laugh with us, but his/her presence is not imperative.

Humor requires introduction. The majority of jokes we hear are little texts based on a given context and references. Most of them have a standard introduction as “once upon a time”... The joker does not need to have a “sharp tongue”; neither he needs to be brief. The joker explains the situation and lets the listener know the situation. Freud cites the funny jokes of Mark Twain and talks about dignity with the following example:

“The rogue, on being led to execution on Monday, remarked: ‘Yes, this week is beginning well.’¹⁷

Dignity is maintained through the economy in expenditure of affect. It is necessary to keep a distance of the problem and the causes of pain in order to rearrange them in a humorous way, and to be able to speak about it with superiority and resignation trying to re-signify the chain that causes suffering. As Bergson has said: the humorist is a wrong way round moralist. The humorist is a moralist who laughs of moral. He turns into ridicule what society believes as sublime. Thus he knows and accepts the code then re-manages and enjoys it. The superego creates new laws for its well being.

In the same way humor is a contribution of the superego to laugh wit has the help of the unconscious. Wit is brief, operates with metaphors, creates neologisms, plays with words and constructs new games through them. Freud said that dreams are a social psychic product and, on the other hand wit is the “most social of all those psychic function whose aim is to gain pleasure.”¹⁸ As well as in dreams, condensation and displacement construct wit. But wit does not need the distance humor needs, maybe because the wound is united to wit.

Those “deviations of normal thinking”, as Freud sometimes refers to wit, have their own logic that is the unconscious’ logic. It has not the same shape of dreams

¹⁶ *Wit*, p. 694.

¹⁷ *Wit*, p. 766.

¹⁸ *Wit*, p. 729.

but a developed social game to obtain pleasure. Dreams are used to avoid unpleasure and wits to acquire pleasure: “in these two aims all our psychic activities meet.”¹⁹

We can do the following distinction:

	WIT	HUMOR	COMIC
Psychic localization	Unconscious (to preconscious)	Superego Pre-conscious	From pre-conscious to conscious
Libidinal economy	Inhibition	Feeling	Idea
People – at least	Three	One	Two
Reasoning	Abduction	Induction	Deduction
Mechanisms	Capacity	Necessity	Knowledge
Process	To do	Possibility	Certify
Registers ²⁰	Relation with the real ²¹	Symbolic	Imaginary

¹⁹ *Wit*, p. 729.

²⁰ It is about Charles Sander Peirce’s reasonings developed in my work *Achados Chistosos* (Witty Found). São Paulo: Educ/Escuta/Fapesp, 1998.

²¹ Relation with the register of Real because, according to Lacan, I we can only speak about Real since it is inatingible. Lacan reinforces his statement saying about wit: (...) the real destructive, disruptive character game of the significant in relation to what can be called the existence of Real”character really (actually) destructive, “disrupter”of signifiers’ game to relation to what could be called the existence of real” In Portuguese: “(...) o caráter realmente destruidor, disruptor do jogo do significante com relação àquilo a que se pode chamar a existência do real” em *Relação de Objeto*.(Object Relations and Freudian Structures). Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar, 1995. p. 301.

Freud maintains similar ideas of other authors that wrote on the comic:

“In the cases just cited the person affected by misfortune, pain, etc., could obtain humorous pleasure while the disinterested party laughs over the comic pleasure”²²

It is also possible to distinguish the comic, humor and wit by the number of persons gripped in their confection. About wit and comic:

“The psychical process of wit is consummated here between the first person – the ego and the third person – the stranger, and not as in the comic, between the ego and the object person.”²³

He continues on the comic:

“The comic process is satisfied with these two persons, the ego and the object person; that may also be a third person, but that is not obligatory.”²⁴

On humor:

“Humor is the most self-sufficient of the comic forms; its process consummates itself in only one single person and the participation of another adds nothing new to it.”²⁵

Therefore, my misfortune can become humorous to myself, comic to who watches it or I can make a wit. In other words, Freud concludes the following:

“For the euphoria which we are thus striving to obtain is nothing but the state of a bygone time, in which we were wont to defray our psychic work with slight expenditure. It is the state of our childhood in which we did not know the comic, were incapable of wit, and did not need humor to make us happy.”²⁶

However the Freud’s classification of jokes is sinuous and rhetorical and flows to a categorical labyrinth.²⁷, where the tendency to compression and to economy remains.

The rogue that will be executed saves a painful feeling through joke as well as Heine saves a feeling of rejection through wit in the hamburger curer corner. Freud tells us about the life of Heine, the poet, and the similarities of his history

²² *Wit*. p. 765. Strachey translated by: “(...) the person who is victim of the injury, pain, and so on, might obtain *humorous* pleasure, while the unconcerned person laughs from *comic* pleasure” *Jokes*. p. 284.

²³ *Wit*. p. 699. By Strachey: “(...)The psychical process in jokes (wits) is accomplished between the first person (the self) and the third (the outside person)” *Jokes*. p. 177.

²⁴ *Wit*. p. 699. By Strachey: “The comic process is content with these two persons: the self and the person who is the object; a third person may come into it, but is not essential.” *Jokes*. p. 176.

²⁵ *Wit*. p. 766. By Strachey: “(...) Humour is the most easily satisfied among the species of the comic. It completes its course within a single person; another’s person participation adds nothing new to it” *Jokes*. p. 284.

²⁶ *Wit*. p. 771. By Strachey: “For the euphoria which we endeavor to reach by these means is nothing other than the mood of a period of life in which we were accustomed to deal with our psychical work in general with a small expenditure of energy – the mood of our childhood, when we were ignorant of the comic, when we were incapable of jokes and when we had no need of humour to make us feel happy in our life.” *Jokes*. p. 293

²⁷ Tzvetan Todorov, in *Teorias do Símbolo* (Theories of Symbol) also considers the analysis of Freud confuse. Lisboa: Edições 70, 1977.

with the wit. We can find not only economy in expenditure of inhibition as an inner resistance to facts and feelings, but also an economy in expenditure of feeling. In other words as we increase our list or "anecdotalary" the classification is going to be imprecise²⁸.

Anyway, there are at least some characteristics that remain in wits. Brevity and sharpness cause illuminated astonishments and bewilderments. Both brevity and sharpness can be found finalizing a humorous speech, thus the humorous speech can contextualize the listener and provoke the surprise of wit. Moreover, a joke can be found in a newspaper on a real shape of humor. Could not this joke be a wit evoked by a sharp and ambiguous word? Would not this wit reveal something of the unconscious?

Language represents the universe of social life. Whenever it speaks, it speaks to another, to be recognized by the Other. The unconscious is not the field of study of Linguistics, although the latter recognizes the fluctuations of the unconscious. Therefore the theory of poetics is interested in the mechanisms of both dreams and wits. That is why the operation of the unconscious could be considered a "semiotics of the unconscious". The poetic of the unconscious suggests, based on Freud (and Jakobson), the following poles of language:

- a) Metonymical behavior:: displacement, faulty reasoning, indirect representation, allusion, modification, *Verschiebung* ...
- b) Metaphoric behavior: condensation, similarity, representation by opposites, neologism, double meaning, multiple use of the same material, analogy, substitution, *Verdichtung*...²⁹

The metaphor obtains its effect of meaning through significant substitution, while the metonym flows in the contiguity chain. They are two axis of speech that produce an effect of meaning through the weaving of chains. Some anecdotes, such as "Famillionaire", present the effect of condensation and others, such as "the rogue", present a displacement from an initial theme to a different theme. The code is evoked to flow in an unexpected chain and then it guarantees success to the spirit.

The poet Heinrich Heine could tell a dramatic and conventional story about his life, a part of everyday life, a chitchat of ordinary people: "a poor curer corner thought that a Baron would receive him as a family member. How stupid he was!" But he found a new signifier (the "famillionaire") through the addition of two other signifiers, as in poetry. Moreover, wit has to be funny.

²⁹ *Verschiebung* means displacement and *Verdichtung* means condensation in German.

In the paradigmatic axis poetry finds “full word” in metaphors and inventions while wit also finds new meanings in the syntagmatic axis. Wit can renew syntagmatic axis and does not assert or impose the last truth.

Wit has been omitted in Psychoanalysis, as Lacan proved it in his “Situation de la Psychanalyse en 1956” (Situation of Psychoanalysis in 1956). He states that most psychoanalysts never read *Der Witz*, the primordial work of Freud. It is known that psychoanalysts do not promote this work because it would not be good to link a work about anecdotes to psychoanalysis. At that time psychoanalytical works such as *Interpretation of Dreams*, *Civilization and Their Discontents* and *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* were considered important. Not even the *Vocabulário da Psicanálise* (Vocabulary of Psychoanalysis) by Laplanche and Pontalis, published in 1967 for the first time, and republished every year, includes “wit” as an entry. As Lacan says:

“Jokes and their relation to the Unconscious remains the most unchangeable of this works because it is the most transparent, a work in which the effect of the unconscious is demonstrated to us to its most subtle confines: and the face it reveals to us is that of the spirit in the ambiguity conferred on it by language, where the other side of its regalian power is the witticism or ‘conceit’ (‘point’), by which the hole of its order is annihilated in an instant – the ‘conceit’ in fact, where its domination over the real is expressed in the challenge of non-sense, where humour, in the malicious grace of the ‘mind free from care’ (esprit libre), symbolizes a truth that has not said its last word.”³⁰

A Psychoanalysis school should include in its curriculum the techniques of wit, as well as rhetoric, gramatic, aesthetic of language and poetics, said Lacan. Of course, the techniques of wit were very important to a theory that was concerned about language and its structure, as Lacan was.

Lacan reversed Saussure’s algorithm to favor a signifier, which slips in the chain to the *point de capiton*:

“The diachronic function of this anchoring point is to be found in the sentence, even if the sentence completes its signification only with its last term, each term being anticipated in the construction of the others, and, inversely, sealing their meaning by its retroactive effect.”³¹

This chain of signifiers, which slips by displacement, is called by Lacan as the “desire” chain:

“It is among the figures of style, or tropes – from which the verb ‘to find’ (trouver) comes to us – that this name is found. This name is metonymy. (...) By which we

³⁰ Jacques Lacan, “Function and field of speech and language” in *Écrits: a Selection*. New York: Norton, 1977. p. 60. Hereafter is cited as *Écrits*.

³¹ Jacques Lacan. “Subversion of the subject and dialectic of desire” in *Écrits*. p. 303.

see that the connection between ship and sail is nowhere but in signifier, and it is in the word-to-word connection that metonymy is based.”³²

Lacan follows with Jakobson:

“The creative spark of the metaphor does not spring from the presentation of two images, that is, of two signifiers equally actualized. It flashes between two signifiers one of which has taken the place of the other in the signifying chain, the occulted signifier remaining present through its (metonym) connection with the rest of the chain.”³³

We can think that such rescue of *Wit* of Freud has the merit to displace the Psychoanalysis from its place of “interpretation” to a place of “relation” to the language materiality. Some readers of Freud have interpreted his theory within a psychological “sphere” where “normality” would be a result from the equation of a molding Oedipic tragedy. The Lacanian return to Freud can be seen as a displacement of psychoanalysis from *Interpretation* to a relation to *wit*.

The Freudian wit “Famillionnaire” was presented by Lacan to continue structuring his concept of Big Other, as well as the “third” refereed by Freud in *Wit*:

It would be though as a “condescend complacency” of the Other for the existence of the spirit. The signifier substitution has value of message by the violation of the code. In a first moment, the message is distant from the code and then the retroactive effect, *Nachträglich*, returns as “spirit”.

In *Television*, Lacan states that wit is a calculated lapse. Alain Didier-Weill explored such logic in a curious relation among three logical times. For him a wit crosses to a fourth logical time, as if it were an unconscious’ knowledge. We can think in an “subjectivant” economic advantage. Wit would have a kind of pre-vision propriety. Would not prevision be a summit of economy?

It is difficult to point out what “spirit” is. But it is possible to perceive different discourses within laugh distinctions. These theories have evolved and their subject matters have changed according to style or age: spirit, to Escarpit, is in Molière; to Propp the model of comedy is in Gógol; Satie is an example of irony to Jánkelevitch; and Bakhtin rescues mockery and comic grotesque in Rabelais. Freud analyzed Heine’s wits. Each work inspires each theory.

Nowadays, in “post-modern” times, humor is present in almost every written work. A text can finish with a citation of Molière or begin with a quotation of Rabelais. It seems to be necessary to quote. But each style, each speech modulates a different discourse.

³² Jacques Lacan, “Agency of the letter in the unconscious” in *Écrits*. p. 156.

³³ Jacques Lacan, “Agency of the letter in the unconscious” in *Écrits*. p. 157.

We can suppose that there are comic, humorous and witty discourses. In a way, this can be found in Freud's work related to the unconscious. As a language, wit is convincing and conclusive, and sometimes maliciously funny. Wit can reveal inner truths but not the last truth, as humor would do. As said before, wit is brief and depends on the receptor as well as an esthetical object. Wit uses condensation to its inventions and creations. It shapes itself by sonority and rhyme provoking a new fusion to evoke new meanings. Wit does not need to contextualize the receiver because he or she has to be in "communion" to receive the new message, and has to briefly process it in order to laugh.

We can think of the humorous discourse as a proverbial or ironic one whose objective is to denounce (and denounce itself) the lack and failure of what is established. Jokes can also use laconism for the same purpose. The irony in jokes uses specific language figures such as: litotes, antithesis and proverbs. Those figures move towards the signified and the enunciate. Balzac, Proust, Henry James and Machado de Assis were indisputably ironic. Nevertheless, they pointed out to social and political excesses in conformity to the lexical code. They did not create new words and expressions. Their readers enjoyed their books identifying themselves from an established safe distance from the character. Even Cervantes, in *D. Quixote*, the beginning of the modern novel, allows us identification with his comic hero, and this is humorism.

Literature points out the gaps of science and the enlightenment and their projects of homogenous beauty and rationalism. We can not be everything, we can not have everything and it is the irony the one that denounces this totality. But irony is neither corrupted nor contorted in the process of pointing out the gaps. We can say that the humorous discourse, irony included, denounces the Master pretending to be the Master (or wishing to be Master). It uses suspension points and generalizations to construct rhetoric of denunciation. It is a modern discourse.

The witty discourse, on the other hand, constantly uses figures of speech that have a sounding register such as: paronomasias (words with the same sound that have different meanings), onomatopoeias (words that imitate natural sounds) and polysindetons (use or repetition of conjunctions in close succession). We also can find anacoluthon, ellipses, and sentences with parenthetical functions, which interrupt text structures fragmenting the narrative and not looking for a totality. It does not cover the lack, on the contrary, it is structured by the lacks. It reveals the impossibility to say the whole truth: words fail. Wit is enunciation, humor is enunciated.

Lacan states that “the act of saying” (*le dire*) depends on “the said” (*le dit*), hence “the act of saying” is prior to “the said”. On the same way the unconscious exists prior to language, language is the existence condition of the unconscious. Humor, jokes included, can be a base to a spark of impetuous and illuminated wit.

Wit’s existence depends on the authority of the Other, however wit takes into account the code and the unconscious. If one would take only the unconscious into account, it would tend to be a psychotic discourse in disagreement with the code. To Lacan such discourse is impossible because it does not do “*lien social*”. Nevertheless, pure signifiers could be recognized by art as a discourse. As art, wit takes into account the code and violates it. It results in a particular discourse which does not ignore the incomprehensible and misunderstanding. Wit would be a “perversion” if the code did not recognize it as legitimate.

Finally, we can say that wits could be jokes but jokes are not exactly wits. Humorous jokes can allow the passage to the rise of a revealing grace of wit. I think of a journey as the journey from the discourse of the Master to the discourse of the Hysteric. Nevertheless, in the same manner the analyst welcomes dreams and lapses, the Other welcomes wit. It is a discourse “more than modern”. Even Shakespeare being the best witty example.

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