

## FROM LETTER TO PHANTASM. SOME REMARKS ON DELEUZE AND PSYCHOANALYSIS IN *LOGIC OF SENSE*

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**ABSTRACT.** *From Letter to Phantasm. Some Remarks on Deleuze and Psychoanalysis in Logic of Sense.* Our aim is to show how the two heterogeneous series of “letter” and “phantasm” make possible, through their convergence understood as the event of sense, a double passage. First, in the order of the Symbolic, the passage of the signifier into the signified. Second, the passage of the whole Symbolic order out of the desiring body. It will be shown that this amounts to a re-conceptualization of causality as sense – event.

**Keywords:** *meaning, sense, paradoxical entity, phantasm, desire, causality*

### Introduction

What is the letter? By Lacan's definition it is “the material medium (support) that concrete discourse borrows from language.”<sup>1</sup> Is the letter the “property” of language since it disposes of it to borrow? And should speech be an exception to language, something other than language, so that it “borrows” something like the “letter”, something seems to be missing, though? Or is it about the “material” consideration of the letter, in which only discourse can make the “materiality” of language appear? It is understood that this is a question concerning the structure and the concrete.

What is certain is that, however we look at it, the capacity of the letter to be “dislocated” has excited many philosophies passionate about language. It is as if you spotted the “disappearing mediator” just after its erasure, to paraphrase Jacques Derrida. Just like him, Deleuze took Lacan's statement seriously: “Plagiarism does

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1 Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, transl. Bruce Fink, ed. W. W Norton & Co., 2007, p. 413;

not exist. There is no such thing as symbolic property.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore an interpretation based on textual “reality” cannot produce an effect, and the mere fact of knowing very well what Deleuze “stole” from Lacan would be a permanently premature symbolization. But then why would we intervene on these texts? Because there is a desire in talking.

If there is no symbolic property, and this means only that for little Hans, for instance, “horse” does not have the same meaning as it does for anyone else, but also that the lexicon and grammar of the unconscious have nothing to do with hermeneutics, if symbolic property does not exist, then what *is* the letter?

### The mirroring of structure and the concrete

In *Logic of Sense*<sup>3</sup> Deleuze will show us how, as soon as the Symbolic dimension appears, we will be dealing with a minimal difference between an element that occupies a position, and the structural position that the element occupies: structure and concrete, so. Hence the concrete element, according to the logic of sense, is preceded by that place in the structure that it occupies. We will thus have two series: the series of the “empty” formal structure - the signifier, and the series of the elements that fill these spaces - the signified. The paradox is that these two series never overlap. Everything we encounter is an entity that is, at the same time, an unoccupied place from the point of view of structure, an evasive object, without an assignable place. Although the structure “has” what the object “lacks”, Deleuze insists on the incongruity of the two series which, as Lacan has already stated, is the minimum condition of *fantasy*. If Deleuze is really a follower of a certain “perversion”<sup>4</sup>, of course the most convenient comparison with Lacan would be at this very level: perversion is an inverted fantasy.

In continuing the exemplification of these two series Deleuze equates – not in vain - the function of the letter with that of the *mirror*:

What are the characteristics of the paradoxical entity? It circulates without end in both series and, for this reason, assures their communication. It is a two-sided entity, equally present in the signifying and the signified series. It is the mirror. Thus, it is at once world and thing, name and object, sense and *denotatum*, expression and designation. It guarantees, therefore, the convergence of the two series which it transverses, but precisely on the condition that it makes them

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2 Cf. Bruce Fink, *Lacan to the Letter*, ed. University of Minnesota Press, 2004, p. 52.

3 Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trad. Mark Lester, ed. The Athlone Press, London, 1990.

4 “Perversion which at least benefits the system of provocations of this new type of philosopher – if it is true that perversion implies an extraordinary art of surfaces.”, in *ibid.*, p. 133.

endlessly diverge. It is the property of being always displaced in relation to itself. (...) We must say that the paradoxical entity is never where we look for it, and conversely that we never find it where it is. As Lacan says, *it fails to observe its place (elle manque à sa place)*. It also fails to observe its own identity, resemblance, equilibrium and origin.<sup>5</sup>

This element is so paradoxical that its mere “fantastic” existence is itself a phantasm: “nothing finalizes itself to such an extent.”<sup>6</sup> The effectiveness of this fantasy, however, is to ensure the permanent imbalance of the two series, as for example Lacan notes that there is always a surplus of the significant over the signified, that it sometimes fills completely and incestuously. At the end of this divergent convergence, we could only meet *sense*. Not just the meaning that things “have”, but the sense that things “make”. Sense is oriented. For Deleuze it is always an event when things “make” sense because, emerging against the background of nonsense, from the chaos in which they are caught, often symptomatically, those words are pronounced (the letter as phoneme) that have never been said before. Some things are signified for the *first time* only late in life, with much effort, and always very sudden.

This is where the materiality of language as such begins. A pre-reflexive, pre-significant substantiality that is the letter as Real, something like the eventual emergence of language as such. Of course, caught in the language, the structure is already complicated, with everything that means the Symbolic and the ambiguity that is introduced by desire, judgment, that letter that the unconscious uses to create its conundrums: metaphor, metonymy. As such, the letter has no meaning, but the meaning is the effect of the directionality of the letter, precisely because we cannot locate its element, so it assures a minimum of circulation.

### **Talking with desire**

This discussion about structure and concrete brings us closer to the kernel of Deleuze's *Logic of Sense*, that is that of the emergence of the universal Symbolic structure out of the particular corporeal economy. As we have seen so far, this is a question targeting the phantasm. Nonetheless, the real difficulty is to understand a kind of “transubstantiation” of the corporeal effect into an autonomous domain of the Symbolic in an immanent way. The problem of structure and concrete was strictly a problem of coordination. Here we have encountered the mirror, that is letter as imago:

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 40.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 217.

There is a third species, distinct from the emanations issued from the depth and from the simulations detached from the surface of things. These are the phantasms, which enjoy a higher degree of independence with respect to objects and an extreme mobility, or an extreme inconstancy in the images which they form (since they are not renewed by the constant supplies emitted by the object). It seems that here image stands for the object itself.<sup>7</sup>

Once the Symbolic emerge, the complication becomes evident, in the sense that we must retroactively presuppose a “cut”, something like castration in psychoanalysis, in order to understand what the signifier stands for. Once again following Lacan, the struggle for Deleuze is how to get rid of the intervention of some transcendent extra-bodily force and derive the whole Symbolic order out of the inherent impasse of the sexualized body itself. As Deleuze notes:

We must conceive of an infinitive which is not yet caught up in the play of grammatical determinations – an infinitive independent not only of all persons but of all time, of every mood and every voice (active, passive, or reflective). This would be a neutral infinitive of the pure event, Distance, Aion, representing the extra-propositional aspect of all possible propositions, or the aggregate of ontological problems and questions which correspond to language. From this pure and undetermined infinitive, voices, moods, tenses, and persons will be engendered. Each one of them will be engendered within disjunctions representing in the phantasm a variable combination of singular points, and constructing around these singularities an instance of solutions to the specific problem – the problem of birth, of the differences of the sexes, or the problem of death.<sup>8</sup>

These are the dynamic geneses that describe “a new heralding of the body founded on phonology.”<sup>9</sup> Taking up in his own way the Kleinian pre-Oedipal “depths”, Freudian and Lacanian approaches to sexuality, castration and the phantasm, Deleuze tries to elucidate how events of language and the emergence of the divided subject are produced so that:

[...] in this case, we find ourselves confronted with a final task: to retrace the history which liberates sounds and makes them independent of bodies. It is no longer a question of static genesis which would lead from the presupposed event to its effectuation in states of affairs and to its expression in propositions. It is a question of dynamic genesis which leads directly from states of affairs to events, from mixtures to pure lines, from depth to the production of surfaces, which must not implicate at all the other genesis.<sup>10</sup>

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7 *Ibid.*, p. 275.

8 *Ibid.*, pp. 214-215.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 231.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 186.

As it is in *Logic of Sense*, very succinctly, we can say that everything starts with the child initially disorganized bodily experiences and object relations. They become a form of an imaginary “good object” (maternal breast) which is in turn signified by a Voice, the familial hum surrounding him. This Voice is not yet a language, although it will become so, and thus be retrospectively made sense of once the child accedes to its organizing principle. The relation to the good object then makes it possible for the child to extract itself from its confused corporeal relations in order to form, from component sexual drives, a total physical surface for the body, as well as for the mother, who is both present and absent. The key to this process is the “phallus”.<sup>11</sup>

The phallus both integrates the mother’s mysterious presences and absences and is a totally satisfying love object which the child strives to be in order to control the mother’s desire. The child thus competes with the imaginary father in order to be the phallus up to the moment when the real father intervenes as the one who in fact has the phallus. It intervenes as someone who partially represents the social symbolic “law” of the mother’s desire, and who thus “castrates” the child of the imaginary phallus. “Castration” here means that the child abandons the attempt to be the phallus for the mother and identifies with the real father, positioning himself with respect to a rule-governed way of organizing social relationships. In other words, the child positions himself with respect to the structural – symbolic dimension of language and culture. This is, for Deleuze, nothing more than the metaphysical dimension of the convergence of the bodily surface with the Symbolic order through the mark of the letter:

“Letter” which, at the same time would trace its limits and subsumes under its images or object of satisfaction. “Letter” at this point assumes no mastery of language and still less a possession of writing. It is rather a question of phonemic differences in relation to the difference of intensity which characterizes the erogenous zones.<sup>12</sup>

Castration, then, effectively represents the event of the divided subject on the metaphysical bodily surface, or the event of the metaphysical dimension for this subject who is both dissolved in intensive corporeal processes and a form produced by linguistic operations that are inter-subjective. As such, the phallus becomes an agent of coordination, and again it can be equated to the letter.<sup>13</sup>

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11 “The phallus should not penetrate, but rather, like a plowshare applied to the thin fertile layer of the earth, it should trace a line at the surface. This line, emanating from the genital zone, is the line which ties together all the erogenous zones, thus ensuring their connection or interfacing (*doublure*), and bringing all the partial surfaces together into one and the same surface on the body of the child.” in *ibid.*, p. 201.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 230.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 231.

The event of language is essentially simultaneous with this event of the divided subject. “Phantasm” is a representation of the satisfaction of the sexual drives and whose “process” is coextensive with the linguistic practices characterizing the metaphysical surface. The phantasm, finding its origin in castration as the child’s passage to the metaphysical, is thus a reinvestment and articulation of the infant’s desire on that surface. At this point, the child is able to gradually connect its speech with the propositions constitutive of events, so does the phantasm become to represent the “satisfaction” of his desire. This process, going from noise to the Voice, from the Voice to speech, and then from speech to the neutrality of the metaphysical surface, is the event of language as such. It is the separation “at the surface” of words endowed with sense and noisy corporeal “things”:

As if the child was learning to speak on his own body – with phonemes referring to the erogenous zones, morphemes to the phallus of coordination, and semantemes to the phallus of castration. This reference must not be interpreted as a denotation (phonemes do not “denote” erogenous zones), as a manifestation, nor even as signification. It is rather a question of conditioning – conditioned structure, of a surface effect, under the double sonorous and sexual aspect or, if one prefers, under the resonance and mirror. At this level speech begins: it begins when the formative elements of language are extracted at the surface, from the current of voice which comes from above. This is the paradox of speech. On one hand, it refers to language as to something withdrawn which preexists in the voice from above; on the other hand, it refers to language as something which must result, but which shall come to pass only with formed units. Speech is never equal to language. It still awaits the result, that is, the event which will make the formation effective.<sup>14</sup>

In the second part of *Logic of Sense* we encounter some even more profound shifts, as the subsequent “logic of events” Deleuze is concerned about. Although it seems we have “caught” the letter in fantasy, it appears in the order of the Real. Deleuze now calls the letter “element”,<sup>15</sup> that which is *not* caught in the Other’s speech Mother, Voice and frees, Michael Tournier’s hero – Robinson, from the phallus itself. As a recapitulation: the letter should be a property of the Symbolic, as the discourse borrows it from the language, most often in the form of the phoneme. Now, we find it at the Imaginary level because it is a phantasm. But at most it is something that resists symbolization as such: it has no objective reality, it is nonsense, surface, lack, any name, irrational like the square root of 1 (the phallus),

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 232-233.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 317.

beyond being, any exaggeration. From the chaos of the depths of the Real, to the inter-subjective dimension of Symbolic language, to the phantasm constitutive of the Imaginary, “letter” is the inescapable mark of an ideal event, of a paradoxical agency. This questions: birth, the difference of sexes, death – these cannot be answered with “causes”, so in order to approximate them, Deleuze had to invent a new concept of the event: that of language as such. But his ideal sense – events resemble the psychoanalytic concept of “phantasm” or that of “floating signifier” deployed by structuralism:

The paradoxical agency is defective, the signifier floats because it lacks a determinate signified: it includes non-sense. Since it includes non-sense, the paradoxical agency lacks ultimate determination and a unique direction or one sense. Precisely because it lacks sense, it is able to give too much sense. The combination of not enough and too much explains why, for Deleuze, the paradoxical agency is defined by a question, a question with too many answers because there is no ultimate answer.<sup>16</sup>

So, the letter, as this paradoxical element, is the unlimited, the lack, endless. It also has to be something on the corporeal surface, a mark, wound or scar. A mark of the pre-symbolic, of the part of language that escapes orality and stands for the materiality of the signifier as such. It is as if the body already talks out of its desiring intensities.

## Conclusion

If we think about the meaning of “letter”, of course we cannot find anything. This is why we said it is this elusive “object”, the paradoxical entity, a principle of emission of singular events. Between them, the hardest to think about is the emergence of language from the body itself. But since the fact that symbolic language cannot represent all phenomena adequately, there is a different “place” for the letter to be inscribed. In order to do so, we must look at another exception, the desiring body of a child. The letter marks the destiny of the subject as something that it will forever try to decipher, because first there are corporeal effects, and only after them comes the Symbolic. This deciphering coincides with the articulation of desire itself. Since it is an “articulation” in place, desire becomes a stuff of language, but also a shield

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16 Leonard Lawlor, *Phenomenology and metaphysics, and chaos: on the fragility of the event in Deleuze*, in “The Cambridge Companion to Deleuze”, ed. Daniel W. Smith & Henry Somers-Hall, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

enabling fantasy. As when something as bothering as desire “makes” sense, a sort of primordial event appears, that points to the depths of the Real of our first intensities which made possible every phantasm that sustains our subjectivity. This is the metaphysical bet Deleuze takes, as all philosophers do once: the bridging of two heterogeneous series: that of form and content, done by the doubly inscribed paradoxical entity, simultaneously surplus and lack. When some short-circuit happens, a letter appears as pure signifier, and the event of sense starts a completely new causality.

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