

BEING A SAINT

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While the current vogue always seems to demand that we participate in yet another psychoanalysis of politics, or even of the politician, the time has come perhaps to invert our point of view and to ask: is there a politics of the psychoanalyst? To this question, my immediate answer is yes. Whether those who occupy this function know it or not, to be a psychoanalyst is to take a political position. That said, we then have to discover what kind of political position it is and to understand how the specific act of the psychoanalyst — his way of taking this position — defines the position itself.

Going where this question leads, I hope not to betray the wish that Lacan let himself express in 1974 in *Television*, where he declares that the best way to objectively situate the psychoanalyst would be in these terms: "being a saint."

An exorbitant wish — one that should make us break out in cold sweats rather than provoke the knowing glances into which we mutually take refuge. But we will sweat even harder if we link the formula, "being a saint," on the one hand, to its source in the work of Baltasar Gracián, and on the other hand, to its aim, which Lacan explicitly avows a few lines after he first cites it: "The more saints, the more laughter; that's my principle, and it may even be the way out of capitalist discourse."¹

The way out of capitalist discourse! 1974 was already far from the carnival of May '68, when the youth imagined that revolution meant occupying a theater: today, we seem light-years further away. How should one now understand the claim that there might be a way out of capitalist discourse, and that it is *us* — we psychoanalysts, students and readers of Lacan — who incarnate this way out, when it has never been more obvious that psychoanalysis has only ever been welcomed and fostered in the capitalist world? Indeed, it has become superfluous to observe that, if certain alternatives to capitalism once existed, or still exist, in some parts of the world, these alternatives all have one remarkable point in common: refusing capitalism, they also end up denying the unconscious and its effects.

Let us begin, then, with this statement: capitalism is not, in itself, antagonistic to the unconscious. On the contrary, it would even be possible

to affirm, following certain of the metaphors that Freud deploys in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, that capitalism and the unconscious are *a priori* made for one another. The unconscious is the capitalist *par excellence*; and capitalism, because it enciphers jouissance by computing surplus-enjoyment in the form of surplus-value, needs psychoanalysis as an organized form of decipherment — especially because, from the worker’s point of view, surplus-value accumulates in the symptom.

Whence the idea that I propose to open the rest of my discussion: there is a psychoanalysis devoted to making sure that the subject of the unconscious lives in harmony with capitalist discourse; and there is *perhaps* (let’s be prudent) another psychoanalysis that would respond to Lacan’s desire and that would seek to produce a rupture, at least a subjective rupture, between the unconscious and the capitalist.

The criterion that separates these two versions of psychoanalysis is nothing other than the position that the psychoanalyst adopts in the process of the cure, or rather the position whereby he recognizes himself in the act. There is a distinction between an analyst who refuses the structure that Lacan calls “the discourse of the analyst,” and one who lets himself be guided by it, allowing the subject in turn to situate himself within this same structure. The one analyst bases his act upon a conception of the cure that considers analytic experience to be homogeneous with unconscious process: this would be analysis *for* the unconscious as a Whole. But the other analyst would base his act upon a concept that makes of analytic experience the occasion for a fundamental overturning: analysis becomes analysis *against* the unconscious as a Whole. On the horizon, this paradox: if the psychoanalyst succeeded in forging a way out of capitalist discourse, wouldn’t he risk having to announce the end of psychoanalysis itself?

In his seminar from 1969-1970, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan elaborates what, to his reading, forms the key to understanding contemporary capitalism, and thus why he calls upon today’s psychoanalyst to take a position. The deviation from the ancient master to the capitalist master turns upon a historical shift, the basis of which appears in Marx’s theory. Deliberately castrating himself, abandoning his jouissance to the slave, the ancient master obscures the truth of his position; this truth is masked through the production of a surplus-enjoyment that should somehow return to him.² The transition to capitalism was inaugurated by the computation of this surplus-enjoyment. To compute does not mean to decipher: the concepts of surplus-value and the accumulation of capital only express the new forms of misrecognition in which the modern master harbors the surplus-enjoyment that returns to him. Lacan even emphasizes, as one of the capitalist master’s characteristics, the fact that his position prevents him from recognizing the fantasy as the motor of his action.³

However, just as the repressed is destined to return, what has been purely and simply rejected must reappear in the real. This is what we observe today in contemporary capitalism — that is, in the system that increasingly grants to science the function of the master, even for the capitalist himself. On May 20, 1970, Lacan points to the consequences of the collusion between present-day science and capitalism, and in the same vein, he warns the psychoanalyst about the impact of this collusion upon his practice. Further, it is in this precise passage that he outlines what one could call a politics of the psychoanalyst.

The most remarkable effect of contemporary science has little to do with the way in which its developments have improved and expanded our knowledge of the world. Lacan shows instead that these developments have, in the first place, determined each of us as an *object a*. In other words, we have all become objects of experimentation, the experiment having become synonymous with the jouissance that the Other derives from the discourse of science. Beware! *You are being filmed...overheard, recorded, and so on.* (I once permitted myself to remark that, even in recent congresses organized by certain psychoanalysts, the television broadcast of the talks in an overflow room gives them something extra, a surplus interest that unquestionably derives from the passionate scrutiny triggered by the vision of the orator's face filling the screen.) In the second place, science today devises and peoples our world with a profusion of objects that did not exist before and that give a renewed thrust to the expansion of capitalism. Lacan baptizes these objects, made to cause desire, with the amusing name of *lathouses*⁴ — a word that, as he quips, rhymes in French with *ventouse*, “suction cup.” Indeed, these “lathouses” inhale us more than they inspire us.

I mentioned the television screen. But I could equally have spoken of the computer that captivated one of my analysands when he was about twelve years old, and literally captured him some years later. He had the idea that sexual jouissance was found “at the heart of the computer.” In order to get to this heart, he had to hack into one of these new-fangled parasites, to decrypt its language and its program, and secretly reprogram the machine so that it would work entirely for his profit.

Unfortunately for him, he succeeded — and thus acquired irrefutable proof that the sexual relation exists and that it is lodged deep inside the computer. From then on, he will feel that he is himself programmed and operated by remote control. Of course, it would not be irrelevant to mention that the computer with which he established this relation was the server for a network of pedophiles, a perversion that my analysand has good reason to be interested in. And, of course, you will tell me, one must admit that he is delusional. Of course, but...does he stray from the truth more or less truthfully than another of my analysands, who is not delusional, but who has for years been rehashing the claim that — so he alleges — the meager size of his penis prevents him from reaching “the bottom of the woman” and, consequently, from knowing for sure that

his partner has really and fully had an orgasm? What would happen to this man if, one day, he did reach the bottom of this other that the limit always steals from him?

I only cite these two examples to underscore the connection between the “lathouses” and *jouissance*, especially the *jouissance* of the Other. Whence the essential interest of the question into which the elaboration of the lathouse leads Lacan on May 20, 1970: “What’s important is to know what happens when one truly enters into relation with the lathouse as such. The ideal psychoanalyst would be the one who commits this absolutely radical act — about which, the least that one can say is that, watching him perform it causes anxiety.”⁵

In other words, the psychoanalyst whose function Lacan restitutes in the discourse of the analyst is called to the place of the very object produced by scientific capitalism. The advent of the analyst thus supposes the system of contemporary capitalism. How does he nonetheless demarcate himself from it?

The lathouses governed by science and exploited by the capitalist seem to promise access to surplus enjoyment. But, in reality, they only verify the axiom of contemporary capitalism: that of “the extensive and therefore insatiable production of the lack of enjoyment.”⁶ Every object produced in this system is only ever an ephemeral model, outdated as soon as it is acquired, and destined by its essence to be replaced by a new and more promising model, and so on.

The vocation of every new object placed on the market for consumption is to become refuse. The surplus-value actualized by the capitalist is the exact measure of the minus-value inflicted upon the consumer. The consumer is thus subjected to the relentless, ever more exigent pressure of a compulsion to enjoy [*un pousse-au-jouir*], access to which withdraws to the precise extent that it shows itself within easy reach. Such a system can only widen the field of consumption, and thus magnify the demand to enjoy, precisely “because of its ineptitude at producing the *jouissance* that would slow the process down.”⁷

Whence the evolution of a society that, because it increases its wealth in the form of capital, becomes increasingly deregulated by the manifestations of aggressivity, envy, hate, and racism — that is, the desperate claims to *jouissance* that, because it cannot be appeased or tempered, is supposed to have been stolen from us, not by the object itself, but by the Other. Segregation is the only precarious limit that remains in such a society: in its various forms, it tends to re-establish the borders that cultures, nations, and social classes have lost the ability to maintain (since the extension of consumption necessitates the universalization of the consumer).

Whence also, something else: the temperature of our increasing wealth is measured by the height of the garbage dump — the overwhelming mountain of refuse and pollution, which are the only tangible and uneliminable remainders that, if the horror of suffocating did not hold us back,

would allow us to decipher the inconsumable byproduct of this organized race for jouissance. The more that capitalism develops, the more it globalizes upon a glob of filth [*plus il tend à faire monde sur un tapis d'immonde*].

Faced with this morass, the politics of the psychoanalyst that Lacan glimpsed would consist in assuming the place, in this capitalist universe, of an original kind of “lathouse”: the only lathouse that — even as it is if not a product, then at least a consequence of capitalism — will itself to become a way out of its infernal cycle. The singular task of the psychoanalyst is to offer himself as an erotic object, not in order to excite or to promise jouissance, but, on the contrary, to slow it down, if not to evaporate it.

How does he accomplish this task? First, by fixating jouissance: as a general rule, one does not exchange psychoanalysts like one exchanges televisions or cars, “for a better model.” Second, by proceeding in such a way that the end of analysis makes it possible to unveil the non-being or, more exactly, the appearing or para-being [*paraître/parêtre*] of the object cause of desire.

The psychoanalyst must make himself into the defective piece of the jouissance unleashed by the capitalism that has been deregulated by science. It is at this point that I would make the connection between the way out of capitalist discourse and Baltasar Gracián’s conception of the saint. To get so close to the lathouse, in order to counter the dominant discourse, requires a very special form of prudence: as Lacan warns us in *Television*, just before referring to Gracián, “they [the analysts] are the ones at risk.”⁸

The risk is inherent to the structure of the analytic discourse; it is the risk of being taken for the manifestation of the object cause of desire and thereby being identified with a being who would feed off of the subject’s lack-of-being. It is not enough, therefore, for the analyst to recognize that he has the status of an erotic object, of a lathouse, in the speech of his analysand. Beyond that, he must have the prudence to parade this status.

A colleague, whom I happened to see recently, left me with an involuntary witticism that will allow me to illustrate the distinction that Lacan draws between good and true prudence. Just to get the conversation going, I ask: “How are things?” And he responds: “Fine, fine... I am getting by! [*je me defends*].” Words of gold. The two forms of prudence for the analyst correspond to two varieties of parade: the one takes the form of avoidance, self-effacement, or the simple defense of the analyst, and the other is akin to what Gracián calls *display*. The first can lead to a certain usage of meaning in the cure, a usage that does well with the rebuses of the unconscious, but that, for this very reason, devotes itself to entertaining and consolidating the capitalism of the subject. On the contrary, the second form of prudence aims to overturn the structure of the discourse of the master in order to make this surplus-enjoyment emerge at the place of its cause, and thereby to unveil its inanity and its essence as refuse.

Why refer here to Baltasar Gracián? Although Lacan had been speaking of his work since 1950,⁹ and despite the eminence of Gracián within Spanish literature, in the seventeenth-century debate between Jesuits and Jansenists, and more generally in the tradition of the great moralist writers, only in recent years has this Spanish Jesuit begun to receive recognition as a baroque genius equal in stature to Pascal, who is his counterpoint, and to Nietzsche, whose disabused flamboyance he outdoes in many ways. His three essays — *Oraculo Manual y Arte de la Prudencia*, *El Heroe*, and *El Discreto* — interlace their witticisms and their maxims around a point of horror that the man of quality is always expected to brush up against, but that he must also know how to ward off. This central point is *envy*. Envy, monstrous and deadly, reigns over the world that Gracián describes; it sends out an evil eye to track all the surplus-enjoyment that the other might have garnered for himself.

How does one trump the scopical jouissance of the Other, present in every eye? This question points to the secret of the art of prudence. Gracián wants to resolve a problem that goes well beyond that of knowing how to become a perfect “courtier.” He is more concerned with how to be a saint without having to become a martyr, how to make oneself a lathouse without letting oneself be consumed. How does one acquire every possible virtue without offering an image of perfection to the malicious eye of the Other that would excite his rage? How does one penetrate into each person and grasp his truth while remaining impenetrable and preventing oneself from seeming to be the keen listener that one in fact is? And, finally, how does one say what must be said in the name of the truth, though it cannot be revealed as such — since, as Gracián writes, the truth is “dangerous...because when it is used to give someone the lie, it is the quintessentially bitter”?¹⁰ Baltasar Gracián saw perfectly that, even if the elevation of the hero inheres in his capacity to posit knowledge in the position of truth, he must still heed the *manner* in which he does do, for manner is not only “the shell, the mark, the sign and, as it were, the annunciation of the thing,” but is much rather “what *endears* the thing.”¹¹

The cardinal virtue of the hero, the key to his saintliness, must then be the art of prudence, which implies mastery over the three primary artifices: silence, absence, and appearance. The first, silence, is the contrary of muteness: it is veritably a matter of being able to half-say as the condition for speaking well. It supposes an elaborated rhetoric. It is a “discretion,” a suspension of speech that upholds the secret and the mystery, a way of “knowing how to play with truth” that imitates “God’s way of keeping all men in suspense.”¹² Whence the laconic and oracular style that makes punctuation into the very essence of speech.

The second, absence, is the art of rendering oneself even more present by playing with one’s eclipse. The third, appearance, is the most subtle and also the most Spanish. Indeed, prudence commands a certain disguise, a cult of form, which has the effect of ravishing envy of its own forces at the very moment when one enters into the terrain where it exercises its ferocious voracity. Far

from effacing himself, withdrawing into invisibility, the Gracián-esque hero somehow nourishes envy with a new aliment; but this aliment must be so insubstantial that it does nothing but create an envious *desire* to know. This aliment is precisely what Gracián calls “display.”

Display is the primary virtue that Lacan himself exemplified for his students, and it points to the way out of capitalist discourse — that is, to the falling away of the lathouse. Far from opposing itself to reality (that the circulation of envy makes consistent), the art of display proves that *appearance is the veritable criterion of being*.

Well before Nietzsche, who will affirm that “everything profound has need for a mask,”¹³ Gracián, in chapter 8 of *El Discreto*, advances that “display is often more important than reality. Display is the most fitting supplement to fill a void.” It is “absolutely necessary and gives to things, as it were, a second being.” This affirmation of appearance as such can even be pushed to the point that it becomes ostentation, which would not be an affectation.

Display, indeed, does not hide a being from the envy that tracks its substance; on the contrary, it reveals what is fundamentally inessential and hollow about this being. It endears the thing and thus produces a surplus-enjoyment detached from the materiality of the product; it manifests the non-value of the thing that reveals itself in the price of the gaze.

“Half is better than the whole,”¹⁴ writes Gracián in a quasi-Lacanian formula. The point in common that links the three artifices — silence, absence, and appearance — can be articulated in these terms: the hero should be not-all in order to provoke desire, rather than excite the *jouissance* that animates envy. To provoke desire for a nothing, or an undefinable something [*un “je ne sais quoi”*], there where envy drives unto the tormenting *jouissance* of a being in his imaginary completion — this is the challenge that the hero assumes. It is also the challenge that Lacan makes into the principle of our politics in the face of capitalism.

Translated by Steven Miller



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1. Jacques Lacan, *Television/A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment*, ed. Joan Copjec, trans. Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss, and Annette Michelson (New York: Norton, 1990), 16.
2. Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, livre XVII: L'envers de la psychanalyse*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1991), 123.
3. *Ibid.*, 124.
4. *Ibid.*, 188-89.
5. *Ibid.*, 189.
6. Jacques Lacan, “Radiophonie,” in *Autres écrits*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 2001), 435.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Lacan, *Television*, 15.
9. See Lacan, “A Theoretical Introduction to the Function of Psychoanalysis in Criminology,” Mark Bracher, Russell Grigg, and Robert Samuels in *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society*, vol. 1, 2, (summer 1996): 13-26; “The Freudian Thing,” in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2002), 112; and *L'envers de la psychanalyse*, 212-213.
10. Balthasar Gracián, *The Art of Worldly Wisdom: A Pocket Oracle*, trans. Christopher Maurer (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 119.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1966), 50.
14. Gracián, *The Art of Wordly Wisdom*, 96.

