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The laughing body: when to laugh is to do

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Abstract: In this paper, I start with the deep interrelationship between the linguistic and the corporeal in order to think about the body in the specific act of laughing. The corporeality of the faculty of laughter will serve as a guiding principle to present an analysis of what I will call "laughter act." A reading of laughter in terms of "speech act" will make it possible for us to appreciate the active capacity of doing things laughing and, more specifically, to explore the dichotomous collapse of the act performed by the laughing body. Thus, I will first go through the specific characteristics of the laughter act and then I will study a particular use from the enunciative position of the female subject, of the Thracian servant. While analyzing the laughter of the slave, I will look at how her doing can be read from the classic theories of laughter and, finally, I will extend the analysis to other possible readings that help us understand both her potential scandal and what her laughter can do. I will conclude how, by unravelling an act of laughter, its performative scope can be appreciated from the necessary interconnection between the linguistic and the corporeal.

Keywords: speech act; laughter; bodies; performative humor; dichotomies; scandal

1 Speech act: from the speaking body to the laughing body

The early feminist reception of the Austinian Speech Act Theory[1] (hereinafter, SAT) was the first to insist on the corporeality of the speech act, by considering the subject of the enunciation a corporeal subject and, what's more, a sexual subject. The extension of the notion of performative to the literary field brought about the

1 After Austin's death, in 1960, his theoretical proposals were taken up by several female cultural anthropologists (de Salvador Agra 2022b), jurists, literary critics, and philosophers, who, since the end of the 1960s, focused both on either relocating the theory in remote contexts, considering it in connection with the legal field, or analysing the "literary speech act," among other issues. The present analysis falls within this line of criticism of Austin's theory.

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problematization of the subject matter of the theory, as it raised questions such as who is the subject the theory talks about and who is the subject built upon that theory.[2] Two issues that brought subjectivity to the foreground in linguistic reflection (Benveniste 1977 [1958]). This line of research has successively been taken up by different reflections on corporeal speech acts; from the initial proposal of Shoshana Felman (2002 [1980]) to those of Mary Louise Pratt (1981), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993) or Judith Butler (1993, 1997), among others, all of which have emphasized the materiality of the speech act. In fact, the feminist approach to SAT soon unveiled the need to take into account, firstly, the fact that all linguistic acts are subjective constructions and, secondly, the fact that the position of the enunciation is also a conditioning factor that establishes which bodies can speak and which ones must be listened to (Spivak 1988). The result has been an emphasis on the deep interrelationship between the linguistic and the corporeal. An interconnection that made it possible to bring the problems derived from the linguistic construction of identity to the forefront of reflection, while opening the debate on the social position of the interlocutors in "the total speech-act" (Austin 1975 [1962]: 52). This way, it was possible to invigorate the theory by stressing that speaking is always a bodily action, where the body is neither conceived as a passive recipient, nor something previous to or outside the linguistic act itself. Considering this interpretive framework, I propose to analyze the specific act of laughing as an action that evidences the centrality of the body, hence, focusing on its performative capacity. Thus, in my approach here, I start from the "speech act" and move on through the "speaking body" to the particular act of the "laughing body." This, paraphrasing John L. Austin, makes it possible to notice all the possible things that can be done laughing.

When Austin introduced his famous notion of the "speech act" in his Harvard lectures, published under the title of *How to do things with words*, he pointed out that speaking is a corporeal action or, in other words, that there is a body in every speech act. In fact, at the end of Conference VIII, the philosopher, in an attempt to clarify the difference between causation and consequence, referred to body movement as the "minimum physical act" (Austin 1975 [1962]: 107) present in all linguistic actions: an ultimate physical action that we discover if we follow all the possible chains of actions, until reaching the necessary materialization upon which speech is based. Well, just like in the children's fairy tale, that is, in the animal fable to which Austin alludes to exemplify his proposal, there is a chain of actions where

2 In this sense, Pratt (1981) brought visibility to the ideology and the epistemic foundations of the theory whereby language started to be considered in terms of action. Specifically, her analysis amplified the Chomskyan notion of the "ideal speaker" by applying it to the SAT and showing how this conception of language also hid an idealization of the subject.

one action takes place after the other. This is known as the "accordion effect" (Feinberg 1970: 134), since, as we open and close the accordion, we fold and unfold it until it is reduced to a local, minimal action; to the bodily act upon which all verbal and written skills are based.

The movement of the body appears as the phonic material used when speaking, and Austin takes it as a different physical consequence of the so-called perlocutionary effects and of the illocutionary act itself. Thus, the latter, the so-called illocution, unlike the psychophysical process that is necessary for the performance of the locutionary act, depends on the existence of conventions, whereby the act is performed in speech itself and not because of it (be it deliberate or not). On the contrary, the so-called locutionary act is the one that refers to the body, to the voice, to the emission of certain articulate sounds through the activation of the vocal tract. Thus, the physical action of pronouncing certain words is the basis of every speech act. Thus, both the physiological organ system and the elementary action of uttering, must be present when we speak, when we do things with words. The truth is that, from the beginning, in Conference I, Austin refers to the physical plane as an inherent component of every linguistic performance. An allusion to the corporeal that does not reduce the body to a mere essential support for the performance of the locution, and in fact connects with the performative function of non-verbal language, that is to say, with the speech of the body. Thus, in that same conference, the philosopher refers to cases in which an action is carried out without producing words, either orally or in written, such as betting by introducing a coin in the slot of a machine (Austin 1975 [1962]: 8). Later, in Conference VI, and with regards to the so-called "explicit performative," he refers to "ceremonial non-verbal actions" (1975 [1962]: 76), such as bowing or tipping one's hat, as possible indicators of the "force." For these gestures necessarily involve certain body movements to perform the saying by doing. This way, Austin's allusions to the role of the body in linguistic actions take into account both the physiological systems required for the emission of sounds (the body as a vehicle of speech) and the cases of gestural communication (the speech of the body). However, despite the necessary condition of the body as a language maker and as a carrier, the philosopher is mainly interested in the ways locutions are used, that is, in the performance of the illocutionary act rather than in the locutionary act itself. It will not be until the reinterpretation of Austin by Shoshana Felman (2002 [1980]) that the body in enunciation will play a central role in the SAT.

The relationship between language and body pushes Felman to turn to the Austinian theory of speech acts in order to highlight the relevance the body acquires in the linguistic act. But even though, as stated before, Austin did not ignore this issue, Felman calls our attention to the potential of the said theory from the point of view of the *speaking body*. For Felman, the corporeal is not only a tissue of

signs, a possible, significant substitute of speech or of the physical activity which is essential for locution, but also – rereading Austin – what results from the dialectics between sign and speech. It is precisely in the dynamics of semiosis, in the interaction between body and speech where Felman says "that Austin's originality lies, for through the new concept of "language act" he explodes both the opposition and the separation between matter (or body) and language: matter, like the act, without being reducible to language, is no longer entirely separable from it, either" (Felman 2002 [1980]: 118). A fusion between body and language that she interprets as "an enigmatic and problematic production of the speaking body" (2002 [1980]: 122–123). The speaking body is an "incongruous but indissoluble" relationship between flesh and words that implements a "*scandale*." A scandal that marks the limits of the intentionality of a sovereign self, while blowing up dichotomous oppositions, such as the one that draws a line between the physical/material and the mental, and with which Felman reminds us that even though the body is not assimilated to the speech act, it does not reside outside it either. Instead, it remains engaged in the sense of power that language exerts over the bodies. The linguistic act is thus understood as a production that "destroys from its inception the metaphysical dichotomy between the domain of the "mental" and the domain of the "physical" breaks down the opposition between body and spirit, between matter and language" (Felman 2002 [1980]: 65). For Felman, Austin is a dichotomous scandalizer because, as Marina Sbisà had pointed out years before, he focuses on "answering dichotomies" (Sbisà 1973). Not only the one arising from the physical/mental pair, but also all those that are incapable of capturing the complexity and variety of experience (de Salvador Agra 2022a). Austin himself, in his own words, renounces to the "deeply ingrained worship of tidy-looking dichotomies" (1964: 3) practiced by a philosophy that simplifies and neglects the riches of the "*first word*" (Austin 1961 [1956]: 133). First words, though ordinary and common, "are much subtler in their uses, and mark many more distinctions, than philosophers have realized" (Austin 1964: 3). The speaking body manages to appraise the value of that multiplicity which is typical of ordinary language (of the specific living body that speaks a variety of languages) while, following Felman's reading, it manages to scandalize the philosophical tendency towards clear and ordered dichotomies which were so annoying for Austin due to their simplicity and apriorism.

Felman focused on unraveling the logics of the scandal articulated in the speech act, resorting, in her reinterpretation, to psychoanalytic and literary dimensions. In fact, for her, Austin scandalizes in a donjuanesque fashion, as he seduces by resorting to failed, unfortunate promises. Promising, for example, a manual about how to do things with words but showing, rather, how not to do things with them. In explaining his game of broken promises, Felman mentions the "failures," the sexual desire and the eroticization or the intentions; but, what really

stands out is the role of Molière's ridiculous character, Don Juan. Austin's supposed Don Juanism allows him to introduce the figure of the laughingstock in order to stress the way in which the philosopher himself would use humor. A use that we could call performative (de Salvador Agra 2022a) insofar as the resulting action of laughing is understood from the point of view of the only way in which it can be performed, i.e., by laughing. Since, as Felman states, laughing is "making (someone) laugh" (2002 [1980]: 81) rather than *saying* laugh. So, if the body does not reside outside the act but rather lives in an irreducible symbiosis with it or, in other words, if speaking is systematically a bodily act, what happens to the body in the specific action of laughing? Up to which extent is the laughing body scandalous? It is by answering to these and other questions that I intend to unravel, in this text, the peculiarities of the laughing body. The corporeality of the faculty of laughter will serve as a guiding principle to present an analysis of what I will call "laughter act." This pun on words responds, in general, to the fact that a reading of laughter in terms of "speech act" will make it possible for us to appreciate the active capacity of doing things laughing and, more specifically, to explore the dichotomous collapse of the act performed by the speaking body from the concrete action of laughing. In other words, it will help us to examine, from the laughing body, the somatic and semiotic interrelationship that comes into play. In order to do this, it will be necessary to start by establishing when to laugh is to do. Thus, I will first go through the specific characteristics of the "laughter act," comparing it with the "speech act," and then I will study a particular use of the said "laughter act," specifically the one carried out by the Thracian servant from the enunciative position of the female subject. While analyzing the laughter of the slave, I will look at how her doing can be read from the classic theories of laughter and, finally, I will extend the analysis to other possible readings that, from the Austinian proposal, help us understand both her potential scandal and what she does or what her laughter can do. So within the performative capacity of doing things while laughing, the case of the Thracian woman will lead us to a type of embodied laughter. Analyzing her "burst of laughter" will allow us to pay attention to the potentialities of what I will call an "illocutionary laugh." In short, I will conclude how, by unraveling an act of laughter, its performative scope can be appreciated from the necessary interconnection between the semiotic and the corporeal.

2 Laughter act: how to do things laughing

Laughter is, for Terry Eagleton, "a language of the body" (2019: 3). A language with an extensive vocabulary made up of multiple modalities of physical expression, to which a plurality of nuances from the level of content is added, since it may be

attached a variety of semantic attributes. The characterizations of the phenomenon of laughter have been just as long and extensive as the ways of expressing and interpreting it. Thus, a history of laughter must be necessarily plural and contain the different theories and connotations attached to its meaning over time. Yet, among the different meanings associated to laughter, we find an aspect that is repeated: the body often occupies a central place when trying to answer what it means to laugh. From Aristotle to Eagleton, all the way through René Descartes (1989 [1649]) to Nobert Elias (2017 [1956]), Mikhail Bakhtin (1984 [1965]), Helmuth Plessner (1970), Mary Douglas (1971), Jacques Le Goff (1997), Simon Critchley (2002), Mary Beard (2014), David Le Breton (2018) or Judith Butler (2019), among others, scholars point out the somatopsychic confluence as a quality which is distinguishable from laughing. As Peter Berger puts it: "Laughter clearly is a phenomenon that involves both body and mind" (1997: 46). Laughing is therefore understood as a manifestation in which both the mind and the body participate.[3] A coexisting duality of word and flesh that emerges in the precise moment in which we try to isolate what we could call "laughter act," in direct relationship with the "speech act."

Austin's theoretical project was intended to break with a philosophical tradition that had established the constative use of language as the only bearer of truth, which he defined as the "descriptive fallacy" (Austin 1975 [1962]: 3). But, alongside with his claim that language is not limited to just representing or describing things, he questioned the opposition between the aforementioned descriptive use and the so-called performative use, understood as one that does not describe but rather performs an action. The argumentative course of his proposal moves from the dichotomous confrontation between constative versus performative to the dissolution and destruction of their original differences. A contrast between both uses that, when transferred to making people laugh, entails, as I will try to explain, similar difficulties. In this sense, if we think of laughter from an exclusively constative use, its sounds should be understood as a description of or as information about both the state of mind of the person who produces them and the object about which the person laughs. That is, laughing would equal a statement about the laughable object from the point of view of what makes one laugh or, in other words, laughter would be seen as a piece of information that marks its referent as laughable. However, thinking of laughter as a descriptive expression entails several problems, such as applying the true/false categories to it (as happens

3 That duality between the mind and body serves to update other dualities between cultural aspects and the natural in laughter (Beard 2014), more specifically, the laughing human versus the laughing animal (Douglas 1971), the mechanical versus the human (Bergson 1913 [1900]) or the relationship between the physical and the metaphysical as the thing that makes us laugh (Critchley 2002).

with the *normal statement*, or the *constative utterance*) or trying to define some lexical or grammatical criterion that would allow us to differentiate a constative laughter from a performative one. Yet, the complexity of laughter is not adequately reflected in a definition which is as narrowing as a conceiving it as an external expression of an internal state or as a register related to a laughable fact or object. It is still necessary to explain the unique bodily expression of laughter. Because the *saying* of laughter is always a laughing body. We can understand this better if we consider the concept of performative, insofar as the expression of laughter is inseparable from its performance. To say laughter is to laugh. Or, similarly, there is only one way to say laughter, and that is laughing. Thus, the enunciation of laughter does not merely describe an action, but it rather fulfils an action. Or, in Eagleton's words, it is "a pure enunciation that expresses nothing but itself" (Eagleton 2019: 3). The self-referentiality of the act of laughter, its *sui referencial* character (Benveniste 1977 [1958]), can only be understood to the extent that its act is identified with its own pronunciation. Laughter is expressed performatively and cannot be separated from the living body that performs it. It is an act whose prominence falls on the body since it occurs in it and through it (Le Goff 1997: 45). Therefore, it is a physiological manifestation that not only involves the mouth but is reflected on the entire face and that can end up involving and engaging the whole body too (Douglas 1971; Parvulescu 2017). I will return, later, to the specific abandonment to the body that laughter involves. So far, the prominent role of the body does not reduce the importance of laughter either as a possible description or as a realization, in fact, the contrast between the two uses is no longer clear: laughter describes by doing. At this point, following Austin's reasoning, we get to the need of a "fresh start" (Austin 1975 [1962]: 91), one that, paraphrasing the philosopher's proposal, may lead us to argue that laughing is performing not only at times, but always.

The notion of "speech act" allows Austin to broaden the initial characterization of the performative and to continue exploring the idea that we perform acts through language This is so because the executive aspect has to do not only with the performative, but also with the rest of the statements, including the constative ones. Hence, as his argumentation progresses, he abandons the initial dichotomy to analytically differentiate the three aforementioned sub-acts in saying, which is always performing: locutionary act, illocutionary act and perlocutionary act. These three levels, when considered from laughter as a possible "speech act," allow us to highlight, in the first place and from the locutionary point of view, the aforementioned signic expressiveness of laughter, whose enunciation would be closer to the semantics typically attached to interjections or onomatopoeias, such as "ha ha ha"

or "hee hee hee."[4] In the second place, the illocutionary component of laughter would take us to the different *forces* with which the act is charged; and it is by taking those *forces* into account that we can establish a distinction between possible things that can be done laughing.[5] And finally, the perlocutionary act of laughter[6] would correspond to the unconventional effects that it may have on an audience, which depend on certain circumstances linked to its performance. Such consequences of laughter, according to Austin, would be different from the ones incorporated into the laughter act itself (which belongs to the level of illocution). This controversial differentiation between illocutionary and perlocutionary acts finally leads the philosopher to a new strategy, intended to put forward a partial typology of illocutionary acts based on the presence or absence of performative verbs. Thus, we reach a clear differentiation between the Austinian "speech act" and the "laughter act" proposed here, given the absence of a verbal vocabulary with which laughter is said to prevent or at least impair the creation of a possible taxonomy of illocutionary verbs endowed with a specific performative use for laughter. This puts the focus on the specific features of making (somebody) laugh that differ from those of making (somebody) talk. In order to better appreciate some of these differences, I will take a look at a very specific communicative situation, a laughter act whose protagonist is a woman: the Thracian servant. An example in which we can see how a specific type of laughter works and of the fact that it involves a greater loss of body control as compared to controlled speaking and acting (Plessner 1970).

2.1 The laughter act in the Thracian servant: superiority, relief or incongruity?

There are few representations of women laughing in history. Few are the cases in which feminine or feminized divinities or real women are the protagonists of

4 This, in turn, leads to the lengthy debate about whether or not laughter is a language or a proto-language; about whether laughter, understood as an interjection, is a speech act because it lacks an illocutionary component (Wierzbicka 1992), or whether it has propositional content and should, consequently, be incorporated into grammar (Ginzburg et al. 2020).

5 Among the wide range of things that can be done laughing, in the area of politics laughter is usually polarized between its ability to reinforce the status quo (the corrective dimension defended, among others, by Bergson) and its potential to question the social order (this is where I will contextualize the possible interpretation of the laughter of the Thracian woman).

6 The phenomenon of laughter is frequently exclusively associated with a perlocutionary effect of humour or jokes or is considered a result of a comic or playful act. In this text, I will also try to highlight its illocutionary dimension, the illocutionary laughter, and not just its reading as a secondary effect of a funny event.

laughter, or – more specifically – of a guffaw. And yet, we found some of the loudest ones: for example, the laughter of Sarah, the first woman to laugh in the Bible; or that of the goddess Demeter, who is depicted in Greek mythology laughing when Baubo shows the former her vulva; or that of Medusa, which Hélène Cixous (1976) taught us to look at and listen to; and also Alison's "giggle," which Angela Carter (1992 [1982]) used to stress the feminine power of laughter; or the uncontrollable and lethal laughter of the three girls from Kagera in January 1962 (Provine 2001), which was the first fateful, contagious "laughter epidemic"; and, finally, the Thracian woman's loud laughter. The latter, as noted by Hans Blumenberg (2015 [1987]), having undergone different variations and historical transformations, has served to highlight different representative functions of an anecdote whose protagonist is a laughing woman.

A very concise account of the famously and frequently quoted laughter that gave birth to serious philosophical work could be provided if we think of the moment in which Thales of Miletus, absorbed in the study of the stars, was gazing into the starry sky while walking and thus fell into a well, which made a Thracian servant maid burst out laughing. Following on the numerous interpretations to which this scene has given rise, I bring it up here to analyze its possible "act of laughter" and thus broaden the readings of an anecdote considered to be central to the birth of the *theoria*. In fact, I believe that this original comical act, from which philosophy sprouted, can be interpreted from three of the classic western theories of laughter (Morreall 1987): superiority, relief, and incongruity.

Thus, the so-called superiority theory applied here and defended, among others, by Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes or Baudelaire would call our attention to a laughter whose victim is a philosopher. A laughter which is a form of mockery that emanates from the feeling of superiority of the person who laughs at the tripping and subsequent fall of the philosopher who, intently gazing at the distant sky (worshipping ideas more than gods), is not mindful of the earth beneath his feet. Thus, as he forgets about the things around him, the things that lie before his eyes, the distracted, self-absorbed philosopher provokes derision with his unfortunate accident. A malevolent hilarity that ridicules the misfortune of others and links laughter to the malicious and the diabolical. In fact, in the detailed story narrated by Blumenberg, from different Western reception contexts, he points out the evil twist of the Thracian woman. The allegedly satanic character of her laughter (Baudelaire 1956) is stressed when, for example, Diogenes Laercio narrates the anecdote and calls her an "old hag" (Blumenberg 2015 [1987]: 24), which contrasts with the more widespread Platonic image of a beautiful young woman that appears in the *Theaetetus*. There are even versions, such as that of Michel de Montaigne, where her alleged diabolic humor is emphasized by making her intervene directly in the action of the fall, for she is the one who makes the proto-philosopher of

Miletus stumble, by setting a trap for him and yelling mocking expressions at him. A clear form of contempt that reinforces the theory of the feeling of superiority as it involves a boost of self-esteem at the expense of others who are mocked, which is an evident expression of triumph over the other.

However, following most of the analyzes to which Blumenberg refers, the laughter of the Thracian woman has been interpreted, rather than as a declaration of her superiority, as a manifestation of her condition of inferiority: her laughter is a response to her lack of understanding of the theory. It is vulgarity who laughs at the realization that philosophy lacks a practical perspective as it cannot prevent a fall. It is the laughter of the ignorant servant, of the one who misunderstands and does not understand, of the one who cannot "see" the theory. The incapacity of a simple woman to comprehend philosophical speculation is what laughter highlights from the perspective of the Thracian woman, considered an idiot. It is the laughter of the idiot precisely because according to Greek etymology, an idiot is someone who does not have the necessary conditions to deliberate and participate in public life because he only deals with his private interests. Hence Blumenberg's statement: "one laughing has herself became laughable in end" (2015 [1987]: 131).

The so-called relief or discharge theory interprets laughter as a release of energy, as Spencer and Freud have especially argued. Laughter is, in our example, a kind of relaxation and, hence, the laughter of the Thracian woman would be an escape valve, a way out from slavery. The liberating and cathartic power of her laughter produces a pleasure that takes on a clear meaning when the positions are reversed: the philosopher now becomes the laughingstock who, helpless and ridiculous on the ground, remains at the mercy of the mockery of a simple slave. The seriousness of the citizen, his position as a theorizing free man, is questioned through a relieving guffaw which, though fleeting and momentary, casts out the nervous tension accumulated by a spectator who, in spite of not being free, glimpses a transitory act of agency as an expression of temporary triumph. This feeling generated by the bodily action of laughing as a reaction can be interpreted in this case as a relief against the rigidity of the hierarchical relationships between men and women, male free and citizens and female slaves, Greeks and barbarians. Laughter is thus presented as a liberation from external control (Elias 2017[1956]), as a relief from the said tension, a joy that produces pleasure and that can also be read as a transgressive action. This way, we would see laughter as a possible political weapon for minorities.[7] In fact, if laughter has always been a matter of class (Eagleton 2019), then, mocking the wise astronomer of Thales while being a non-Greek woman, a foreign

7 The culture of popular laughter, as Bakhtin (1984 [1965]) formulates it, is presented as a form of popular practice that subverts the mechanisms of social control imposed on the lower classes. Laughter, Bakhtin writes, "liberates not only from external censorship but first of all from the great

servant, is, to say the least, an act of resistance against the prevailing norms. The powerful laughter "at the powerless" (Critchley 2002: 10) would sprout here and, with it, the political potential of the weakest who would get rid of authority and rigid social structures through laughter.

The theory of incongruity, as Hutcheson, Kant, Schopenhauer or Pirandello have taught us, places the focus on laughter as the result of a violation of expectations. That is to say, it arises from a clash or contrast which compromises and violates shared beliefs. Thus, the laughter act of the Thracian woman could then be understood as an act that takes place when the philosopher falls and alters the normal course of things. The fall thus violates the idea of the philosopher lost in thought, and the expectation of his seriousness is dissipated by the unexpected stumble and his subsequent fall. The incongruity pointed out by laughter points out the fact that theory is illogical and impractical for life. The loud laughter expresses surprise the moment in which Thales does not watch where he is going. It also derides contemplative life and, therefore, the philosophical claim to pure theory. His reflective and solemn attitude would be questioned at the moment of his fall, proving his little or no practical knowledge. The result is a breach in the common sense associated with the professional seriousness of the philosopher, a defamiliarization of the implicit beliefs about his philosophical occupation. An expectation that blemishes the image of the theoretician and makes the woman laugh; and with her act she shows the reality of what does not fit the situation. A hilarity of common sense in the face of the absurd and the impracticality of theoretical knowledge. But besides that, his lack of agility, due to the rigidity of the falling body, allows us to interpret the stumble – following Henri Bergson (1913 [1900]) – as an incongruity arising from the contrast between the mind and the body, between life and matter, between rigidity and elasticity or between the living and the mechanical.

This brief account, based on three of the classic theories,[8] shows that all of them explain laughter as a consequence of something. As Anca Parvulescu puts it, these

interior censor; it liberates from the fear that developed in man during thousands of years: fear of the sacred, of prohibitions, of the past, of power" (Bakhtin 1984 [1965]: 94).

8 It is commonplace that some laughters fall outside these three theories, not only because none of them has been able to explain all the circumstances in which we laugh so far, but also because each of them can be disproved by several counterexamples. In addition, we should consider other theories, such as those that analyse laughter from a Darwinian evolutionary perspective, insisting on its biological dimension, or those that fall within the Bergsonian approach and understand laughter from the point of view of its social role and function and usefulness. Others insist on its relationship with game and there are some that connect it with the field of emotions. A genesis of laughter, like the one proposed in 1961 by the philosopher Marie Collins Swabey, in terms of the cause of laughter or the reason why we laugh, would undoubtedly prove a endless theoretical plurality since, as Eco wrote, one "he laughs for infinite reasons" (1998: 67).

theories have fundamentally sought to clarify the comic, the humorous or humor. In other words, they have focused on what causes laughter, rather than on laughter itself (2010: 2). Together with Austin, we would say that the perspective is rather perlocutionary, that the outburst of hilarity of the Thracian woman is the effect of an incongruity, a relief or a feeling of superiority. In any case, these are the consequences of a comical and unfortunate situation where the slave's laughter is understood from her position as receiver and simple spectator. Now, without abandoning this perlocutionary approach, another nuance should be added, as we should focus on the consequences of a laughter that is scandalous because it is uttered by a woman. This will make it possible to broaden the perlocutionary prism and, with it, the scope of the scandal.

2.2 The scandal of the bodies of laughing women

The speaking body, as conceptualized by Felman, scandalizes by disarticulating the dichotomy between the mental and the physical (between the conscious and the unconscious) while disturbing the sovereign intention of the speaking subject. Quoting Butler when he synthesized Felman's proposal: "A speech act is reducible neither to the body nor to a conscious intention but becomes the site where the two diverge and intertwine. In this sense, the speaking body scandalizes metaphysics, in particular, its penchant for clear dichotomies" (Butler 2002: 122). Thus, Felman emphasizes the semantic excess of the speaking body, which goes beyond the control and the intentions of the speaker. An excess she identifies as scandalous insofar as it sprouts from the inherent fallibility of the performative. It is precisely this consubstantial possibility of failure in our doing things with words that Butler will present years later as a way to elaborate a subversive policy (taking advantage, in line with Derrida, of the iterability and quotability of the speech act itself). But the said excess, in addition to a reading from the same notion of "*force*," as opposed to that of meaning, is subject to other interpretations, such as the one Austin used to point out – from the *uptake* – the need to secure the reception, that is to say, the essential bidirectionality in every speech act; or also the reading that appeals to the very idea of the perlocutionary, since it is not enough for the said effect to be supported by the intention of the issuer. We find the same co-responsibility of the act, the dependency of the others on the speaker, in the laughing body. That is why in the act of laughter the limits of control are clearly exceeded too, both with regards to the body and to the intentionality of the action. Thus, in laughter, both the mastery of the body and the intentions of the person who laughs may fail, since it is not possible to determine, unilaterally, what one can do by laughing. This can help us understand the scandal produced by a laughing woman's body, as is the case with the Thracian

slave. That is to say, considering the same perlocutionary perspective, the woman's laughter is scandalous in the eye of those who are laughed at and those who hear it.[9]

If we turn to the dictionary, a practice that Austin (1961 [1956]) himself encouraged in the study of common language as a starting point for philosophical reflection, the first meaning of "scandal" in the Oxford Dictionary leads us directly to the perlocutionary dimension, for it is what causes indignation since it is considered contrary to morality and to social conventions. Because, as Beard puts it, laughter "as an object of study is an inextricable combination of bodily disruption and discursive interrogation, explanation, and protocol" (2014: 67). Laughter, understood as a motor of social disorder (which is beyond control), has traditionally been interpreted as a corrupter of the ideal figure of women: it makes their face ugly, disfiguring it and compromising beauty (Melchior-Bonnet 2021). A shamelessness that is contrary to the standards of good conduct,[10] brings about the loss of decorum and femininity and also generates distrust, insofar as it involves an uncontrolled female body (Melchior-Bonnet 2021). Laughter is considered improper for women (Schaeffer 2017). This is why, if laughter causes the female body to get out of control and to become monstrously deformed,[11] women must cover their mouths when laughing (Le Breton 2018). It is convenient to hide it and not to show the teeth, as this is an unequivocal sign of aggressiveness. In the words of Sabine Melchior-Bonnet (2021: 58), it is the open body of laughter versus the closed body of smile. The open mouth, associated since the Middle Ages with liberation and orgasmic discharge, is a sign of sexual obscenity (Schaeffer 2017), and proves the failure of the morality that restricts the behavior of bodies. In fact, the explanation is based, among other things, on Western dichotomous relationships. When laughing, the body comes to the foreground and, alongside it, the associated values of the mortal, ephemeral, the irrational and – precisely – the feminine; as opposed to the immortal, rational and masculine belonging to the soul and the mind. Thus, the ethical and aesthetic code that delimits the field of the laughable is established, legitimizing which laughs are permissible and which ones are not, while determining who has the privilege of laughing without being a laughable object. In other words, who is authorized to laugh and who, consequently, laughs without authority. The conquest of laughter is thus presented as a good Trojan horse (Barba 2021; Billingsley 2019) built to blow up those prohibitions that insist on silencing it (the most extreme example being the bans

9 And this always happens with the help of the context and of a third other, i.e., it entails the perspective of the third person involved since, as Le Goff (1997) rightly points out, three people are required in laughter: the one who causes it, the one who laughs, and the one who is laughed at.

10 In book III of his *Ars Amatoria*, Ovid (1929) pointed out very explicitly that women must learn the "art of laughing" to do it according to their gender.

11 Bakhtin's "body grotesque" (1984 [1965]) also appears here, manifested through laughter that bursts forth and breaks the boundaries of what is socially permitted to women.

decreed in Afghanistan by the Taliban, where the voice of female laughter has been censored since 2021). Laughing in a context of strict rules that seek the phonetic containment of laughter is surely scandalous. Since, as Sabine Melchior-Bonnet explains:

> The norms of etiquette, increasingly strict through the centuries, are intended to channel an ancestral male fear of the overflowing feminine laughter, which emerges from the depths of a strange and disturbing body. The roles are not interchangeable. It is up to men to take the conversation to a higher level by whispering more or less daring jokes; it is up to women to modestly savour the spice, hiding their laughter behind the *touret de nez.* (Melchior-Bonnet 2021: 7)

Loud, open-mouthed, boisterous, extravagant, excessive laughter, the kind that disrupts the system, can be understood as noisy. In fact, another meaning related to the scandal and included under the corresponding entry of the dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy is, precisely, that of noise. This is exactly how Butler proposes to consider the loudness of laughter (2019) when he explicitly advocates those subversive noises that constitute "a critical external environment in the face of a whole regulated world of sound and meaning" (Butler 2019). Laughter as noise would have the capacity to disturb, in this sense, the functioning of the hegemonic dichotomous sound. For it is a kind of noise that can infiltrate the dominant meanings and scandalize them. A guffaw that, just like the loud and annoying sound of the siren song (Billingsley 2019), disturbs and destabilizes the discursive order imposed. Hence, Andrés Barba affirms that "men are afraid of women's laughter" (2021: 42) since they fear "facing their laughter, because their laughter is, ultimately, an idea" (2021: 154). Ideas which bother not only when they spring from the ugly bodies of witches, with their chilling laughter, but also when they are associated with any female body that gets out of control. This is where the hilarity of the speaking body, from its scandalous, mocking and subversive laughter, brings together the corporeal dimension and the political-cultural one, which can ultimately be understood as a way to mitigate, blur and question those omnipresent dichotomies of western tradition. That is to say, the potentiality of laughter, in addition to bodily uncontrollability, can exert, as Butler (2019) defends, a renewing power. Maybe that is why, years before, the philosopher wrote that "laughter in the face of serious categories is indispensable for feminism" (Butler 1990: viii). From this perspective, the acoustics of laughter lead to interesting readings that – from a long feminist tradition spanning from Virginia Woolf (1905) to Butler (2019).[12] underline the transgression of a type of embodied laughter from the point of view

12 Parvulescu calls the twentieth century "the laughing feminist century" (2010: 3) due to the contributions made by Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva.

of its political possibilities. But not just at the level of hearing, from the perspective of the listener who hears it and may therefore get scared, but also at the level of emission, from the perspective of the person who claims it. The performing dimension, as we will see below, from the enunciation of laughter by women, is in itself scandalous. This is why the Thracian anecdote has been told insisting on the role of the woman as a spectator or simple witness of the fall of the proto-philosopher. However, her action of laughing can be understood as something that jeopardizes her passive role. Thus, if we consider the etymology of the word,[13] the term *skándalum* is a Greek loan that meant stone, obstacle, trap to make somebody fall. In the case in point, the coincidence between the one who falls and the one who laughs outrageously may be interpreted in several ways (including the aforementioned interpretation by Montaigne), but in all of them, both protagonists would the subjects of an action. For this reason, and without denying the perlocutionary dimension, it is possible, in my opinion, not just to focus on what causes laughter or why, but also on what is done or what can be done by laughing. This perspective, in the case of the Thracian slave, means that she ceases to be a passive witness (someone who observes the fall and, consequently, laughs) and becomes an enunciator (someone who does by laughing). This twist takes us to the illocutionary dimension of the laughter act, i.e., to the illocutionary laughter, to how the sounds pronounced do something; creating, perpetuating or altering reality. And this can be understood not only from the idea of laughter as an effect but also as an act, or, in other words, from the perspective of those who do things by laughing.

2.3 About the illocutionary laughter or about those who, laughing, do

In Blumenberg's exhaustive compilation something is missing: the significant fact that the person who laughs at the philosopher has a female body. She is an anonymous slave,[14] whose laughter urges us to turn our eyes towards the immediate, to

13 Austin (1961 [1956]) defended etymological research, justifying the need to pay attention to ordinary words at their origin, and to look back in order to recover images and appreciate the influence of the sediments of the past.

14 The anonymization of the slave becomes stronger in the plural "the maids" used in some versions of the anecdote, such those by Heidegger or Socrates (who speaks of an ignorant crowd). Anonymity is also reinforced by the fact that, sometimes, the woman is said to be an inhabitant of Miletus or Trecca, instead of an inhabitant of Thrace. The exception to his anonymity is found firstly, in Aesop's fable, where the woman does not appear and Thales is an astronomer, also without a name, and, secondly, in the eleventh century, in the version by Peter Damian, where the Thracian woman does have a name.

look downwards, towards the mundane, towards the ordinary. She is the one who, by laughing, brings us down from sky to earth, from the clouds to the political arena. Setting foot back on the quotidian, descending to the concrete, is a movement that coincides with the criticism that Austin himself made about the philosophical adoration for dichotomous pairs. In fact, his philosophic stance involved looking at the diversity of ordinary words, dwelling on the richness of common language in order to use it as a guide, as a starting point for philosophical reflection (Austin 1961). Austin himself thus moved away from the allegedly elevated attitude of dichotomous classifications to invite us to a way of doing philosophy that involved descending to specific cases by the hand of common language.

If we try to translate the experience of the Thracian woman – following on the Austinian spirit – we see how in all the expressions of ordinary language we frequently use, the corporeal dimension appears. That is to say, those locutions point out the fact that performing laughter has to do with the body, it "comes from the body" (Frey 2021: 12). So we can say that the Thracian slave woman cracked up, cackled, laughed out loud, died laughing, fell out, laughed her ass off, split her sides, crowed, frolicked, rolled on the floor laughing, or even burst into laughter. All these linguistic expressions lead us to the laughing body from the dichotomous destabilization that compromises unity, while dividing and disarticulating the body. A reaction, as Plessner points out, "uncontrolled and unformed eruptions of the body" (Plessner 1970: 31). A "disorganized"[15] (Plessner 1970: 138), as he specifies later on, whose meaning is clearly reflected in the aforementioned common language expressions. All of them point to laughter as disarticulation and momentary loss of body control (we can even say that she pissed or shitted herself laughing). An "inappropriate configuration of the body" (Parvulescu 2010: 7) that, notwithstanding, as Butler (2019) rightly warns, retains the power of laughter, even when it implies a loss of bodily control.

There is always power in laughter as long as it is understood as noise, as communication. This is what Douglas points out when claiming that: "laughter is a unique bodily eruption which is always taken to be a communication" (Douglas 1971: 389). Its function as a form of communication, i.e., laughter as a social interaction, as a communicative act, connects us with its performative character. In other words, it connects with what Paolucci and Caruana (2019) call "semiotic laughter." That is to say, that laughter which, in direct allusion to Umberto Eco, makes us notice its capacity to do, to question the existing social order. For, as Eco says, the laughing one

15 The anthropological perspective of the German philosopher illustrates the precarious balance between having a body and being a body since, at least for a while, the laughing individual does not have a body but is a body. This, for Plessner (1970), is a sign of our condition as biplanar beings and of our eccentric position.

is the one: "who was aware of the fall, and thus of the provisionality of the order given" (Eco 1963: 238). The Thracian woman reacts against this provisionality and against the consequent contingency of the social order. With her laughter, she manages to discover other paths that can lead to different social orders (e.g., placing life problems and the problems of coexistence at the center). For this reason, for Eco, laughter is the "maieutics of the possible" (Paolucci and Caruana 2019: 74), a form of philosophical doubt that embraces its capacity to turn dominant discourses upside down. Because when we laugh, from a given social framework, we open up spaces, draw possibilities, trigger new births … thus entering the logics of production. Laughter's capacity to do things, to question the prevailing values, points to one of the possibilities within its spectrum as a doer. In fact, its illocutionary force, as Austin showed us, will always be subject not only to its emission but also to the context,[16] to the authority of whoever expresses it and to the necessary response of whoever receives it (understood as *uptake*). Thus, the discursive capacity of laughter will depend on the necessary *conditions of felicity* (announced in Conference II) for laughing to do things with laughter. This is why, as a speech act, it is also contingent upon and subject to misfortune, that is, "things that can be and go wrong on the occasion of such utterance" (Austin 1975 [1962]: 8).

In short, the *force* of laughter does not come down to a single factor, instead, for someone to laugh and for the act to be understood as such, it must be given the floor, it has to have the power to laughter. It must be possible to do things with it. This could let us conclude some of the illocutionary "disabilities" that end up undermining the power of the laughter of women, in general, and of the Thracian woman, in particular, to do things. In other words, it is necessary to analyze urgently whether their act of laughter could be deprived of illocutionary potential, in line with all the current studies that, from the philosophy of feminist language, address the social nature of the speech act.[17] More specifically, it would be necessary to analyze how social inequalities activate or deactivate the performativity of the act of laughter. In fact, once more, we find an example in the case of the Thracian slave. The anecdote,

16 In this sense, Douglas (1975) in her analysis of jokes, argues that it is the social context that grants the license for laughter.

17 And it is at this point that we get to the problem of the "illocutionary silence," following Miranda Fricker (2007), Jennifer Hornsby (1993), Rebecca Kukla (2014), Rae Langton (1993), Ishani Maitra (2004), Marina Sbisà (2009), and Nicole Wyatt (2009), among others. The problem is updated when considered in the light of laughter, that is, whether or not there is a lack of illocutionary understanding of laughter, whether or not it is a problem of epistemic authority related to the question of who can laugh, or whether or not the act of laughing itself is distorted and the individual ends up performing an act which is totally different from the one intended. This question would exceed the limits of the present analysis.

narrated so many times with its significant variations, seems to leave laughter itself and the subject who performs it in the background. In fact, the different reuses presented by Blumenberg coincide in presenting, mainly, certain mechanisms that provoke her laughter (always understood as an effect rather than as an act), and in making the identity of the laughing individual invisible because, as Adriana Cavarero (1990) rightly points out, her gender is presented as something casual and expendable.[18] Curiously enough, there is only one version of the legend, a version from the second century by Tertullian, where the individual who laughs at the falling philosopher is not a woman, but an Egyptian man. Changing the laughing subject from a servant into an Egyptian wise man is clearly summarized by Blumenberg when he states that the Egyptian man "does not laugh out of a lack of understand, but out of better knowledge" (2015 [1987]: 47). It is no longer the inferior point of view of a woman, who simply reacts to the fall of Thales laughing out of sheer ignorance, but the confrontation from an upper position between the Egyptian and Greek wisdom, something that could only happen by changing the gender of the protagonist in a rigid, dichotomous world.

3 The laughing body, the doing body

Viewing the laughter of the Thracian woman as an illocutionary act involves, in line with Baudelaire, paying attention to her laugh in terms of who performs it and not in terms of the laughable object. Thus, we would say (changing him/his into her): "the ability to laugh, is in him who laughs, and not at all in the object with excites his laughter" (Baudelaire 1956: 117). Or in Critchley's words, "the object of laughter is the subject who laughs" (2002: 14). Considering the Thracian woman as the subject of the action of laughing adds the illocutionary dimension to the classical theories of laughter. In other words, the act is not only contemplated from the perlocutionary point of view, instead, an emphasis is made on the need to go further and deal with how laughter itself constitutes an action. This shift, which results in embracing the illocutionary perspective, means moving from the laughable body to the laughing body. Turning our eyes towards the triumph of the Thracian woman entails paying attention to the conditions that are necessary for performative felicities to exist. In other words, we must not simplify the phenomenon of laughter or think of it as an isolated phenomenon, as a simple,

18 The interesting reading proposed by Cavarero (1990) allows us to analyze role of women in philosophy while denouncing, through four figures (the Thracian woman, Penelope, Demeter and Diotima), the Western symbolic order of male subjectivity hidden under the neutral universality.

harmless laughter that arises as a result of her ignorance, a discharge of tension or an unfulfilled expectation. Several factors surround the performance of laughter and its power to cause action is not intrinsic, instead, it depends – as Austin said – on many things going well. Laughter is uttered in a certain context, received by certain people and emitted by a body that appears laughing. For although laughter, as a speech act, can take different forms and perform different actions, in all of them its capacity to do things will be tied to the body. Hence, the speaking body in the specific act of laughing clearly brings into play the interconnection announced by Felman between the semiotic and the corporeal. In our case, paying special attention to the laughter of the slave, to its capacity to do things, entails highlighting the slave's role as a leading subject and not as a simple witness of the fall of the philosopher of Miletus. At the same time, it allows us to explore the idea of the scandal that it entails. A scandal that takes place both from the perspective of the laughing body and from the position of the person who receives and hears the laughter. There is something annoying about the guffaw of the Thracian woman.

The laughter of the slave has the illocutionary force to introduce changes in normative positions. In fact, that is where part of its scandal lies, namely, in what it exceeds, since her laughter is incompatible with the control of the body, and it disturbs it and proves its failure. Laughing involves body movement, which contrasts with the static image of a smile. Laughter includes voice, action, noise and breathing and, thus, it contrasts with the resting face, the calm and silent body of the smile. Therefore, the decorum of the smile opposes the scandal of the laughter of women. And this evinces the "taking laughter," the taking over of the logos and the abandonment of the passivity associated with the role of the feminine. This way, the traditional dichotomies are scandalized because, as it has been defended throughout these pages, laughter involves making loud noises, which is why it has the capacity to destabilize the said dichotomies. Laughter, embodied in a woman, breaks the norms that assign and arrange the position of the laughing and the laughable subjects. The Thracian woman, with her laughter, with the lever of ordinary life, storms into heaven and brings down that dichotomous pedestal that establishes who is the speaking (laughing) subject and who is the subject created by theories (let's consider Blumenberg's reasoning a paradigmatic example of this). In conclusion, considering the action of the Thracian woman as an act of laughter, setting up a parallel with the speech act, allows me to conclude how, through laughing, women claim their position as a subject, an incarnated subject who ceases to be the laughing spectator to become the one who does through laughter. Or, using an explicit pun on words, taking care of how women's bodies do things with laughs.

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