Fig. 7: John William Waterhouse, *Thisbe or the Listener*, 1909, oil on canvas, 97x59 cm. Image Source: Fine Art Photographic Library, London.

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The (Un)Touchable Touch of Pyramus and Thisbe: Doubt and Desire

“There was a fissure, a thin split, in the shared wall between their houses, which traced back to when it was built. No one had discovered the flaw in all those years—but what can love not detect?—You lovers saw it first, and made it a path for your voices. Your endearments passed that way, in safety, in the gentlest of murmurs.”¹

In the ancient Greek story of Pyramus and Thisbe, masterfully rewritten by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*,² the two lovers in the city of Babylon occupy connected houses, but are forbidden to marry because of their parents’ rivalry. Every day, they whisper their love for each other through a crack in one of the walls, planting on each side of the wall the kisses they are prevented from giving each other.

One night, they arrange a hidden meeting outside the city walls near Ninus’s tomb, under the shade of a mulberry tree. Thisbe arrives first, with her face well veiled, but as she is waiting for Pyramus, she hears a lioness roaring and escapes to a nearby cavern, leaving her veil behind. The lioness quenches her thirst in the nearby spring and comes upon the veil, tearing it with her jaws, which are bloodied from a recent kill. When Pyramus arrives just a moment later, he is horrified by the sight of the lioness and Thisbe’s veil, assuming that the wild beast has killed her. In terrible anguish, he plunges his sword into his side, then immediately draws it out of the wound and falls onto the ground. When Thisbe comes out from her hiding place, she finds Pyramus lying under the tree, dying. Pyramus sees her in his last moments and then passes away. Then, Thisbe cries out a plea to the gods for them to be laid together in one tomb and for the mulberry tree to retain the emblems of their death in the colour of its fruit. Having said this, she takes the sword from Pyramus’s grip and stabs herself in the chest, falling dead onto Pyramus’s body. A still image of the two lovers lying under the mulberry tree, finally joined in an embrace that they had never

1 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. A.S. Kline (Luxembourg: PiT, 2000), 109. In this article, I am using A.S. Kline’s English prose translation of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* because it uses contemporary language that corresponds well to the question of modern subjectivity, which I would like to bring forth in my analysis.

2 Ovid’s account, published in 8 CE, is the oldest surviving version of the story, although he was adapting an existing etiological myth. While Pyramus and Thisbe lived in Babylon in Ovid’s tale and Ctesias had also placed the tomb of his imagined king Ninus near that city, the myth probably originated in Cilicia (part of Ninus’s Babylonian empire), as Pyramos is the historical Greek name of the local Ceyhan River. The metamorphosis in the primary story involves Pyramus changing into this river and Thisbe changing into a nearby spring. Shakespeare adapted this story for *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*’s play-within-a-play, which is performed by a group of craftsmen in the final act. Ovid’s *Pyramus and Thisbe* was also one of the templates for Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. See the translation by A.S. Kline referenced above and also Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. David Raeburn (London: Penguin Books, 2004).

managed while alive, draws the love story of Pyramus and Thisbe to a close. All is silent and inert; the only moving thing is the stream of blood pouring from the lovers' wounds, sinking into the soil and irrigating the roots of the tree. The myth says that the gods hear Thisbe's lament and permanently change the colour of mulberries in order to honour their forbidden love.

In this article, I will analyse the story of Pyramus and Thisbe through the framework of *haptic scepticism*. Haptic scepticism is an emergent area of philosophical inquiry which explores the specific relation between touch and doubt that is, as I will argue, fundamentally perforated by desire. In the following pages, I would like to put forth two main things: first, I would like to demonstrate how touch as a structural (rather than empirical) phenomenon is intrinsically connected to both doubt and desire, and thereby show how it underlies the configuration of subjectivity, and second, I would like to indicate that beyond doubt as a rational procedure, which is the basic principle of the line of modern scepticism stemming from the Cartesian tradition, there is a more fundamental mechanism of doubt at work which is intertwined with the function of desire in the unconscious.

The line of my first argument makes use of the concept of the *(un)touchable* that I developed in my previous work, especially in relation to language and to the question of the materiality of touch.³ In the present article, I will focus on the correlation of the category of the *(un)touchable* and the mechanisms of doubt and desire. I will

³ In my article "The Category of the (Un)Touchable in Haptic Materialism: Touch, Repetition and Language," in *The Language of Touch: Philosophical Examinations in Linguistics and Haptic Studies*, ed. Mirt Komel (London: Bloomsbury, 2019): 91–106, I establish the category of the *(un)touchable* as the core concept of *haptic materialism*, which addresses the question of touch within the structures of language. On the one hand, the article shows how the idea of haptic materialism refers to a certain twist in the notion of materiality brought about by the institution of modern science, pointing out the consequent shift in the conception of touch that gives way to the category of the *(un)touchable*; on the other, it demonstrates how the structural analogy between the category of the *(un)touchable* and the process of repetition can help us to understand the mechanism of touch within the structures of language. Through a reference to Roman Jakobson's 1956 essay "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances," in *Language in Literature*, ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987): 95–114, I argue that from the perspective of language, the idea of touch could be understood on two different levels: the metonymical and the metaphorical. On the metonymical level, touch is perceived as a direct connection, as proximity without mediation, while on the metaphorical level, it is considered to be always already mediated. The metonymical touch touches so much that it becomes one with the touched, while the metaphorical touch does not touch at all—there is always a vast distance between *the touching* and *the touched* that prevents the touch proper from ever happening. I demonstrate how both dimensions of touch, the metonymical and the metaphorical, come across a certain impasse at some point—therefore, the main argument of this paper lies in the proposition that touch as such can only exist in view of its impossibility. This argument is further elaborated through the analysis of the relation between touch and repetition within Saussure's concept of the linguistic sign, comparing it to the relation between touch and repetition within Marx's theory of value. The category of the *(un)touchable* was further elaborated within the "Language of Touch" research project conducted by Mirt Komel at the University of Ljubljana from 2016 to 2018. See Kolenc, "The Category of the (Un)Touchable in Haptic Materialism."

demonstrate, on the one hand, how the category of the (un)touchable can help us to understand the intrinsic connection between touch and desire, and, on the other hand, how the category of the (un)touchable is at work in the very procedure of doubt.

The overall line of my second argument leans on Lacan's development of the Cartesian concept of subjectivity, based upon the suspension of the conscious "I" and the relocation of *cogito* to the realm of the unconscious. By bringing together Lacan's statement that Cartesian subjectivity arises in the moment when doubt recognises itself as certainty, Freud's elaboration of doubt as an unconscious procedure in his analysis of obsessive neurosis, and the concept of the undecidability of equipollence (*isostheneia*) that was central to Pyrrhonian scepticism, I will demonstrate how doubt as a rational operation or a tool of thought inevitably stems from uncertainty and hesitation, which accompany the mechanism of desire. Further on, I will argue that it is precisely this hesitation, a paralysis not only within the realm of thought, but within the realm of desire in the first place, that echoes in the spatio-temporal paradox of touch, which inhabits the category of the (un)touchable. I will also claim that the real opposite of certainty is not uncertainty and doubt, but rather belief; a plain, undoubtful conviction. Uncertainty and doubt are, on the contrary, the very flip side of certainty, which empowers decision-making and action. I will come to the conclusion that uncertainty and doubt are the necessary and productive forces—not only of every rational procedure—but also of the very constitution of subjectivity.

The two lines of my argument lead to the elaboration of haptic scepticism, where touch is not engaged as an experiential examiner of truth or reality—that is, as a tool of methodical doubt—but rather proves to be a structural operator of a more fundamental *skepsis* that precedes and conditions any rational operation. In dealing with the abovementioned questions, this article undertakes a structural rather than phenomenological or experiential approach.

The Category of the (Un)Touchable

I consider touch to be a paradoxical entity that lingers between the two walls of impossibility: the impossibility of distance on the one hand and the impossibility of proximity on the other. In both cases, touch itself is, so to say, condemned to failure. In order to give a name to this inner tension that draws the inconceivable line between the two, I coined the term *(un)touchable* in my abovementioned previous work. However, it is through its very failure that it somehow nevertheless works: it succeeds exactly in its non-success, in its falling through, in its coming to nothing.

To picture the paradoxical core of touch, we can imagine the category of the (un)touchable as a spatio-temporal paradox. In a spatial sense, we can imagine touch as a tangent to a circle, following Derrida: "A tangent touches a line or a surface but without crossing it, without a true intersection, thus in a kind of impertinent perti-

nence. It touches only one point, but a point is nothing, that is, a limit without depth or surface, untouchable even by way of a figure.”⁴ Further on, we can imagine distance as a passant in relation to a circle and proximity as a secant to a circle. The basic idea of the category of the (un)touchable is that one can define neither the point where the passant turns into a tangent nor the point where the tangent turns into a secant.

If we think in terms of two units touching each other, the paradox of touch lies in the fact that in order to establish touch, we need to have two separate units, which are shrinking the distance that separates them and proceeding towards each other until they reach the point of close proximity. However, once touch is established, we no longer have two units, but rather a single unit. If we have two units, touch has not yet taken place, because the units are still separated, but as soon as they connect, then touch has already expired, because the two units have now merged into one. It is impossible to say exactly where touch has occurred in the transition from *the two* to *the one*. It is impossible to mark the point of touch within this transition. There is no space for touch. Hence, touch occurs on the very borderline between the two and the one, within a gap or a leap between these two stages. This means that the event of touch demands an impossible state of being connected and separated at the same time, of being at once the two and the one. Touch is where it is not. In terms of the classical ontology of being, this state is paradoxical, because it declares that something *is* while *it is not*.

However, it is precisely paradox as a logical tool that opens up the ontology of difference as a counterpart to the ontology of being: while for the ontology of being, something either *is* or *is not*, for the ontology of difference, something both *is* and *is not*. Something can occur as its very absence. Therein lies the core idea of Nancy’s concept of “touching the limit” (*toucher la limite*):⁵ the presence of touch has to be understood in view of its absence. The ontology of difference installs the idea of possible impossibility, of impossibility as possibility, that forms the conceptual core of the category of the (un)touchable.

Temporality enters the spatial aspect of the paradox of touch through the idea of the time that is needed to proceed from distance to close proximity (or in the opposite direction), from separation to connection, from the two to the one. Transition is a movement that demands both a spatial and a temporal dimension of coming from a point A (distance, two units) to a point B (proximity, one unit) or from a point B to a point A. Touch happens sometime during the temporal transition between the two points. Therefore, in the sense of time, the paradoxical core of touch displays itself through the fact that the event of touch never really occurs: just before the two units connect, we are still expecting it, but once they are connected, it has already

⁴ See Jacques Derrida, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. Christine Irizarry (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

⁵ Jean-Luc Nancy, *L’expérience de la liberté* (Paris: Galilée, 1988), 47.

gone, leaving us in a state of only remembering it. We are always only asymptotically getting closer to the moment of touch, whether we are moving in the direction of overcoming the distance or in the opposite direction of unlocking the too-close proximity. As a temporal event, touch stretches between the temporal provisions of the *not yet* and the *always already*: touch has never yet happened, but at the same time, it has always already expired.

One can discern two elementary agents of touch, the active and the passive, the subject and the object, *the touching* and *the touched*.⁶ If the two agents of touch are separated, then touch is perceived as something that has not yet happened, relentlessly sticking to the point where it is just about to occur, while if they are perceived as inseparable, the touch is never really there because it has always already happened. Either the touching touches so much that it becomes one with the touched, or it does not touch at all: there is either a vast distance between the touching and the touched that prevents the touch proper from ever happening or a too-close proximity between them that cannot prevent the touching from spreading into the touched and from becoming too much of a touch, so much so that touch as such immediately disappears. In both senses, a spatial as well as a temporal sense, the object of touch, the touched, is something that is at the same time touchable and untouchable. Moreover, it is touchable only under the condition of its untouchability, and vice versa. The category of the (un)touchable therefore means: what can be touched is always already untouchable, but it is only through its untouchability that something can be touched at all. The inherent impossibility of touch is its very condition of possibility.

Another important thing to add here is that the category of the (un)touchable functions on two levels: what is (un)touchable within this mechanism is not only the elusive object of touch, *the touched*, but also touch itself as a structural phenomenon, marking an impossible borderline between distance and proximity.

Pyramus and Thisbe are caught in both the spatial and the temporal aspects of the paradox of touch. Their touch has been endlessly postponed, one obstacle followed by another (the wall, the lioness, the bloodied veil, Pyramus's death), and they are relentlessly pushed into the temporality of the *not yet*, until the moment

⁶ It has often been argued that the two are reversible, that *the touching* has always already turned into *the touched* and vice versa: as soon as we touch it, it inevitably touches us in return. The reversibility of touch was most notably explained by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (see *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes [New York: Routledge, 2012]). Even if the dividing line between the touching and the touched seems vague because of the unavoidable reversibility of touch, it can never be entirely obliterated: it is impossible that *the touching* could simultaneously also be *the touched*. The positions never collide—rather, they are in a constant process of exchange. This is precisely what Merleau-Ponty wants to stress with his famous example of self-touching. Merleau-Ponty's argument was further elaborated by Jean-Luc Nancy in *Corpus* (Paris: Métailié, 1992) and *Noli me tangere: essai sur la levée du corps* (Paris: Bayard, 2003), Jacques Derrida, *Le toucher: Jean-Luc Nancy* (see Derrida, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*), and Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, repr. ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998).

when they both drop dead, at once finding themselves in a state of being *always already*: what has never been there is suddenly lost forever. The distance between the two lovers is maintained until the point where it is directly transformed into a too-close proximity, somehow meticulously (using the elusive inter-space between life and death) jumping over the point of their touch. There they are, *the two* of them still alive, but a moment before they finally manage to touch each other, Pyramus passes away. What follows immediately after this is *one* single unit of an undefined clump of human flesh.

Touch and Desire

Through the category of the (un)touchable, touch engages the function of desire. What empowers one's desire is precisely the structural impossibility of grasping its object: what we eventually touch is never what we have desired. The object of touch, the object of our desire, is always transposed. It is never in its place. It slips between our fingers just before we touch it. The fact that we cannot touch the object, the impossibility of touch, structures the subject, the object, and the entire mechanism of desire. However, what we do touch, in a way, is the very impossibility of touch, its very absence. Hence, the object of our desire is untouchable, yet touchable. Moreover, it is touchable only under the condition of its untouchability: it is accessible precisely through the prism of its inaccessibility. Hence, we can touch the object of our desire only because we cannot touch it.

Pyramus and Thisbe crave closeness, but are only able to touch each other with their whispering words through a tiny crack in the wall. Their lips encounter the wall once again and they imprint their kisses upon it instead, "touching the wall with kisses that could not reach the other side."⁷ "Let our whole bodies meet," they beg the wall, "or if that is too much perhaps, to open to the kisses?"⁸ What they ask of the wall is indeed too much, because this is the very structure of desire: to desire is to desire too much, to always desire more. In contrast to a need, desire is insatiable: "Thus desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction, nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second, the very phenomenon of their splitting (*Spaltung*)."⁹

⁷ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 109.

⁸ "Often, when they were in place, Thisbe here, and Pyramus there, and they had each caught the sound of the other's breath, they said 'Unfriendly wall, why do you hinder lovers? How hard would it be for you to let our whole bodies meet, or if that is too much perhaps, to open to the kisses we give each other? Not that we are not grateful. We confess that we owe it to you that words are allowed to pass to loving ears.' So they talked, hopelessly, sitting opposite, saying, as night fell, 'Farewell', each touching the wall with kisses that could not reach the other side" (Ovid, 111).

⁹ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock Publications, 1977), 275.

Once they finally manage to arrange an assignation outside the city walls, the unexpected course of events prevents them from finally fulfilling their longing with a touch, a hug, a kiss, a conjugation. Their meeting only happens when it is already too late. When Thisbe comes out of the cavern, Pyramus is dying. She takes him in her arms, “cradling the beloved body” and bathing his wounds with tears, “mingling their drops with blood.”¹⁰ Planting kisses on his cold face, she cries out: “Pyramus, what misfortune has robbed me of you? Pyramus, answer me! Your dearest Thisbe calls to you: obey me, lift your fallen head!”¹¹ At Thisbe’s name, Pyramus raises his eyes, darkening with death, and “having looked at her, [buries] them again in darkness.”¹² In a strange interplay of facts and assumptions, presence and absence, life and death, the so-much-desired touch is fatally missed and therefore it tragically turns into a double suicide. The two loving creatures never manage to enjoy the pleasure of the trembling event of touch: just as the moment of touch is wishfully expected, it has already passed away (without ever really occurring), and the two corpses lying one on top of the other are suddenly touching too much, as a single indistinct pile of flesh.

However, what the lovers demand from the wall is indeed too much to ask: they are asking for the impossible event of touch. For they are not aware of the fact that the moment their whole bodies met would never be the desired event of touch, but would, on the contrary, always turn out to be the deadly event of the too much of a touch that would kill it all, instantly putting an end to both touch and desire.

How to Touch the Concept of Touch?

In numerous paintings throughout the history of art, Pyramus and Thisbe are depicted either while whispering through a crack in the wall or in the moment when Pyramus is lying on the floor and Thisbe is leaning over him, stabbing herself with the same sword that Pyramus used a few minutes earlier. The sharp end of the sword is touching her chest a mere moment before it penetrates her skin, while the handle of the sword is touching Pyramus’s body, from which life is quickly draining and will soon fade away.

In both depictions, an object is set *in-between* the two lovers: first a wall, then a sword. It has often been argued that the object positioned between them is a metaphor for forbidden love. Instead, I will claim that the composition with a disturbing object is not a metaphor, but rather a (beautiful) visual representation of the category of the (un)touchable. According to my argument, both the wall and the sword between Pyramus and Thisbe function as *mediators of touch*: they both connect and

¹⁰ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 111.

¹¹ Ovid, 111.

¹² Ovid, 111.

separate the subject and the object of touch. They maintain the distance, but at the same time, they also establish proximity between the two agents of touch, the touching and the touched. In doing so, they render touch possible, but they do so precisely through its very impossibility. In that sense, any other mediating object could be used as a visual representation of the concept of the (un)touchable: a stick, an umbrella, a rope, a piece of furniture. We are not touching, yet we are touching: this is the elusive structure of touch.

A fissure in a wall, however, introduces a certain conceptual twist that intervenes in the idea of a wall as a simple visual representation of the category of the (un)touchable and brings it to another level: a level where *the very representation of the (un)touchable posits itself as (un)touchable*. We can conceptually grasp the idea of a wall as a mediator between distance and proximity, but—and here is the key—there is a fissure within this very idea. And it is precisely through this fissure that our conceptual grasp of the idea of touch becomes present: the very concept of the category of the (un)touchable is something that is touchable, yet untouchable.

In a similar way, a sword, too, contains an additional turn of the simple visual representation of the category of the (un)touchable. Why? Because in this case, the mediator is not just any object (a wall, a stick, a rope), but a sword, *an object posing a threat*. Here, the threat is first and foremost a structural and temporal category. What is inscribed in the threatening object is the inevitable future of the course of events: sooner or later, a sword will pierce the body. It will not stay in-between, separating yet connecting the two bodies; sooner or later, it will abandon its benevolent mediating function (we touch it in a way that we do not touch it) and violently proceed towards *the too much of a touch*. It will sooner or later destroy the fragile constellation of the (un)touchable and inevitably turn the impossible possibility of touch, maintained by desire, into a raw impossibility, into a point zero. It will turn Thisbe, who is now holding it as a mediator of touch and is thereby touching Pyramus through her desire to touch him, into a corpse falling onto another corpse, ultimately changing them into one indistinct pile of flesh. Therefore, a sword is certainly a suggestive visual representation of the concept of the (un)touchable, but at the same time, it is also a kind of a reminder of the irreparable and deadly discrepancy between our desire to grasp the object (in representation) and our inability to fulfill this desire.

The function of the mediator of touch could, at first glance, be related to the idea of a *connecting distance*, which echoes in Plato's concept of *metaxy* (*metaxu*) presented in the *Symposium* via the character of the priestess Diotima.¹³ Tutoring Socrates, Diotima uses the term to show how oral tradition can be perceived by different people in different ways, depicting Eros not as an extreme or purity, but rather as a *daemon*, a child of Penia (Poverty) and Poros (Possession), set between the divine gods

13 Plato, *Symposium*, tr. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John S. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 457–505 (198a–212c).

and mankind. The notion of *metaxy* as the “in-between” or “middle ground” was later used by Plotinus to express the ontological placement of humans between God and animals, and it was brought to modern thought by several thinkers, most notably by Simone Weil. “Every separation is a link,”¹⁴ Weil claims, using the example of a wall: “Two prisoners whose cells adjoin communicate with each other by knocking on the wall. The wall is the thing which separates them but it is also their means of communication.”¹⁵

The concept of *metaxy* could well be related to the idea of a wall or a sword as a visual representation of the concept of the (un)touchable,¹⁶ but if we take a closer look at the two concepts, we can trace an important difference between them. While the idea of a connecting distance is an idea of something that is set in-between two agents, realms, or events, and is there to connect them through their separation, the idea of the (un)touchable is actually exactly the opposite: there is nothing set in-between the two agents of touch, no third agent to help them solve the impossible situation of always being either separated or connected, but never experiencing the impossible moment of touching each other. The real problem here is not that they *cannot* touch, that they cannot become connected and that they therefore use the third element to help them, as in the idea of a connecting distance; on the contrary, what is at stake here is that they *can* touch; there is no outer obstacle to prevent their connection, yet the moment of touch is always missed, because in itself, it is structurally impossible. Within the idea of the mediator of touch as a simple visual representation of the concept of the (un)touchable, the mediating object does not represent the presence of the third agent, installing the positive aspect of connecting distance and thereby establishing the (mediated) touch, but it rather represents the very gap between distance and proximity, the missing link between *the one* and *the two*, where touch is present only in its absence.

In case of *metaxy*, we are talking about touch that ontologically exists, that possesses a certain reality, a certain being in the world, even if the two agents are using a mediator to help them to bring it into existence, while (un)touchable touch as such has no existence in itself, because it is ontologically set in-between being and non-being and is therefore something that can only happen in its absence. But at the same time, and this is the core idea of the concept of the (un)touchable, it is the

¹⁴ Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 145.

¹⁵ Weil, 145.

¹⁶ An inverse illustration can be found in Teresa of Avila’s vision in which an angel pierced a golden spear so deeply through her heart that it grabbed hold of her entrails, which he forcefully pulled out. While the blow should have been fatal, she did not describe the episode in the manner of a threat, but as an encounter with an object of desire. The only thing she felt was the great love of God. A “remainder that God is able to touch by being untouchable,” or, more precisely, (un)touchable. His presence is thus felt only as an “absent existence, inscribed into the community through tireless declarations and testimonials.” Goran Vranešević, “Anatomical Aporia,” in *The Language of Touch: Philosophical Examinations in Linguistics and Haptic Studies*, Ed. Mirt Komel (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 85.

very impossibility of touch that is the condition of its possibility: the touch is precisely where it is not; it happens in the time-lapse between the moment when it is just about to occur and the moment when it has already gone. In this disposition, distance and connection are not, as is the case with the concept of *metaxy*, set in a benevolent and all-resolving cooperation; they are, on the contrary, set in a paradoxical scheme of an always impossible encounter between them—either there is distance and no proximity, or there is a too-close proximity and no distance. However, to maintain desire is not to decide for either of the two options, but rather to linger in-between, to nurture the gap between distance and proximity and thereby maintain the impossible possibility of touch.

What is of crucial importance here is that the choice set by the category of the (un)touchable is not functioning on the level of deciding for either distance or proximity (this situation is resolved by the idea of *metaxy*), but on the level of choosing either the constant lingering between distance or proximity or the decision for either distance or proximity. If we take the first choice, we choose touch, but a touch that is always already lost. If we take the second choice, we initially resign from the possibility of touch. Thereby, the category of the (un)touchable sets the mechanism of *forced choice*: either we touch it in such a way that we cannot touch it or we do not touch it at all. Lacan calls this mechanism the *vel* of alienation, which is “defined by a choice whose properties depend on this, that there is, in the joining, one element that, whatever the choice operating may be, has as its consequence a neither one, nor the other.”¹⁷ The choice is, then, “a matter of knowing whether one wishes to preserve one of the parts, the other disappearing in any case.”¹⁸

None of these options is optimal, but we have no other choice: of course, we will go for the first option, which is still better than the second one. Better something than nothing; better a sparrow in the hand than a pigeon on a roof. However, is this really the case? The mechanism of forced choice defines the Hegelian relationship between a master and a slave. A person who is attacked is confronted with the following choice: *your money or your life!* If you choose your money, you will instantly lose both. If you choose your life, you have saved yourself, but what is left for you is a life without money. A master would go for all or nothing, while a slave would choose to adapt to his or her circumstances in order to stay alive. A master would choose unconditional freedom or sacrifice everything, while a slave would choose life under any conditions, even at the price of losing his freedom. The forced choice trapping Pyramus and Thisbe (although they do not realise it) is the following: either they choose the deficiency of touch in infinite overcoming the distance, but maintain desire, or they go for the fantasmatic melting of the two entities into one, where they will lose both—not only touch, but also desire.

¹⁷ Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 211.

¹⁸ Lacan, 211.

The two levels of the representation of the concept of the (un)touchable discussed in this section match the abovementioned two levels of untouchability within the mechanism of touch: on the one hand, it is the object of touch, the touched, that is un-touchable for the subject of touch, the touching, while on another level, it is touch itself, the very idea of touch, that is (un)touchable, inasmuch as it is conceptually graspable only through its ungraspability. The idea of the mediator of touch (a wall, a rope, a stick) as a simple visual representation of the concept of the (un)touchable matches the first level of the representation of the concept of the (un)touchable: it represents the (un)touchability of the object of touch, the touched. I then analysed two examples that represent the concept of the (un)touchable even more precisely, not letting them be confused with the idea of a connecting distance: a fissure in a wall and a threatening object. Through these two examples, I have subjected the very mechanism of representation to the category of the (un)touchable, attempting to point out that on the second level, touch as a concept can only be conceptually graspable through its ungraspability.

In both cases (the fissure in a wall and the sword), the representation not only has its *metaphorical* dimension—it is not only a (beautiful) visual representation of the category of the (un)touchable (i.e., representing the category of the (un)touchable as the duality of distance and proximity of touch)—but it also brings in the *metonymical* dimension where the mechanism of representation is itself subjected to the category of the (un)touchable. This means that through the very act of reception, we as spectators are caught in the paradox of touch: we can grasp what is represented only in such a way that we cannot grasp it. In contrast to the metaphor of forbidden love, which keeps the recipient at a safe distance from the object (i.e., this picture represents forbidden love), the representation of the (un)touchable sets him directly into the kernel of the paradox: it offers him a metaphorical distance (i.e., this picture represents the paradox of touch), but at the same time binds him with metonymical proximity (when watching it, I am directly involved in the paradox of touch: I can grasp the idea of the (un)touchable in this picture only in such a way that I cannot really grasp it). Therefore, in both compositions with a disturbing object, the category of the (un)touchable is not only represented, but embraces the entire mechanism of representation through the impossible encounter between metaphorical distance and metonymical proximity.

In the next section, I will attempt to demonstrate how the materialist turn of Aristophanes's vision of love suspends the fantasy and thereby removes the veil that covers the brute materiality of the mechanism of forced choice, elaborating also on the master's choice versus that of the slave. I will connect the master's choice to Aristophanes's fantasmal vision of love, in which the myth of Pyramus and Thisbe is trapped, and connect the slave's choice to the emergence of modern subjectivity: the Cartesian subject of the unconscious.

The Suspension of Fantasy and the Slave's Choice

Once the sword between Pyramus and Thisbe strikes a blow, once Thisbe collapses onto Pyramus, the touch is gone, the desire is gone, and the two lovers fall into a warped embrace: the embrace of death. Through the category of the (un)touchable, the story of Pyramus and Thisbe embodies the ultimate materialist turn of Aristophanes's¹⁹ fantasy of love as described in the *Symposium*,²⁰ the fantasy of two lost halves finally finding each other and becoming one. This becoming one is not a structure of love; rather, it is a structure of death.

In a way, Thisbe is well aware of this, or at least this is the core part of her fantasy: "He, who could only be removed from me by death, death cannot remove."²¹ However, this fantasy has, so to say, two components: a materialist one and an idealist one. The *materialist component* brings in the idea of an *ultimate touch* through the image of the two lovers lying together in the same grave. Thisbe speaks about the impossible event of touch that will finally be realised once they are both dead: "Do not deny us the right to be laid in one tomb."²² However, she does not know that in the very moment that the touch she is wishfully expecting is executed, it will have already passed away—along with the desiring subject.

The *idealist component*, on the other hand, further develops the corporeal image of the two bodies in one tomb into the idea of an *emblem*. Pyramus and Thisbe are joined in "the strangest hour," in the moment when time ceases to exist and streams into eternity and brings love to its fulfilment in the eternal memory: "And you, the tree, that now covers the one poor body with your branches, and soon will cover two, retain the emblems of our death, and always carry your fruit darkened in mourning, a remembrance of the blood of us both."²³ First we have death, and then we have the emblems of this death. First we have blood, and then we have the remembrance of the blood: the mulberries, darkened in mourning. The materialist idea of an ultimate touch is further developed into the idealist vision of the emblem of an *ultimate love*.

However, we should not forget that here, both the materialist idea and the idealist vision are components of a fantasy. Both the image of the two lovers lying together in one tomb and the development of this corporeal image into the idea of an emblem are equally fantasmatic. In fact, we can see that the entire plot of the story of Pyramus and Thisbe is set between two fantasies: the lovers' initial fantasy of removing all earthly obstacles (both physical and social) in order to finally fulfill their long-

19 The fantasy of love as two people becoming one is commonly referenced as Plato's ideal of love, which is not quite accurate. In the *Symposium*, this fantasy represents Aristophanes's point of view and his understanding of Eros.

20 See Plato, *Symposium*, 189c–93e

21 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 111.

22 Ovid, 111.

23 Ovid, 111.

ing in corporeal love, and, after the tragic course of events which prevents the realisation of the so much desired touch of the other, the final fantasy of love, which, splitting itself into a corporeal and an emblematic component, transposes its realisation into the perspective of death.²⁴

In Ovid, Thisbe's fantasy is heard by the gods and is thereby transformed into a myth. However, the fantasy nevertheless remains what it is: a fantasy. It is maintained in the *not-yet-not-anymore* temporality of desire and as such, it is structurally non-realizable. For Lacan, the fantasy is both that which enables the subject to sustain his desire and that by which the subject sustains himself at the level of his vanishing desire.²⁵ By offering a resolution or a sort of reconciliation of a fantasy, a myth often functions in the direction of wish-fulfilment, which is, according to Freud, one of the main tasks of dream-work, and thereby institutes a fantasy on a cultural level: it institutes the plot of a collective dream, which, inscribed in the symbolic order, perpetually engages desire.²⁶

What Thisbe desires when stabbing herself is not what she ultimately gets. She desires touch, but gets *the too much of a touch*, where touch is no more. She desires unification, but gets death, where love is no more. The fulfilment of desire is impossible, but it is precisely this impossibility that establishes modern subjectivity.²⁷ For desire, Lacan claims, is nothing but a relation of being to lack²⁸ and therefore it is a constitutive force of subjectivity.

In the constitution of the human psychic apparatus, Lacan claims, there are two overlapping lacks: *the symbolic lack*, which emerges in the dialectics of a subject's access to its own being in relation to the Other, and *the real lack*, which refers to something real: to the fact that within the realm of sexual reproduction, a living creature will be struck down by individual death. The overlapping of the two lacks forms a complex mechanism of alienation, which, for Lacan, is a fundamental mode of human "being in the world." Through the idea of the two lacks, Lacan puts forward

24 The fantasy of becoming one within the horizon of death echoes throughout the Western tradition of *l'amour-passion*, which was meticulously analysed by Denis de Rougement in his book *L'amour et l'occident* (Paris: Éditions 10/18, 2001).

25 Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 185.

26 This was the brilliant insight of Edward Bernays, the father of creating modern mythology by means of advertising.

27 Aaron Schuster proposes a sketch of a "speculative history of pleasure" where he elaborates on the relation between desire and its fulfilment through three historical stages: ancient Greek hedonism, Christian erotic culture, and modernity through psychoanalysis. Modernity creates a subject of a neurotic symptom—a disjunctive relation between the structurally unfulfilled desire and a fulfilment that does not bring pleasure. See Aaron Schuster, "Being and Enjoyment in Plato's *Philebus*: A Lacanian Perspective," *College Literature* 45, no. 2 (2018): 246–77.

28 "Desire is a relation of being to lack. This lack is the lack of being properly speaking. It isn't the lack of this or that, but lack of being whereby the being exists." Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book II. The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954–1955*, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Cambridge University Press, 1988), 223.

a criticism of idealism (accompanied by his argument as to why psychoanalysis is not idealism) which suspends any aspect of the foundation of human subjectivity in the entirety of self-awareness on the one hand and relates this suspension to a rejection of any harmonic vision of love on the other.

From this perspective, Lacan criticises the common idealist interpretation of Aristophanes's myth:

Aristophanes' myth pictures the pursuit of the complement for us in a moving, and misleading, way, by articulating that it is the other, one's sexual other half, that the living being seeks in love. To this mythical representation of the mystery of love, analytic experience substitutes the research by the subject, not of the sexual complement, but of the part of himself, lost forever, that is constituted by the fact that he is only a sexed living being, and that he is no longer immortal.²⁹

The becoming one is not a structure of love: it is a structure of death. This is a suspension of fantasy. For Lacan, the role of fantasy is defensive: it is to veil the lack of the Other, to veil castration. To suspend a fantasy is therefore to tear the veil, to face the fact that the subjectivity does not rest upon any sort of identity or unity, but rather emerges from a lack. However, we should not confuse the materialist turn of Aristophanes's fantasy of love with the materialist aspect of Thisbe's desire: the point here is that the materialist turn simultaneously suspends both the materialist and the idealist aspects of Thisbe's fantasy of love as an eternal unity. The materialist turn sets death not within the horizon of eternity, as Thisbe's fantasy does (both in its material and in its idealist aspect), but reveals it to be a brutal fact of an individual's finality. However—and this is the key point here—it is precisely this brutal reality that empowers the dynamics of desire and sustains the structure of subjectivity.

Pyramus and Thisbe are caught in the mechanism of forced choice set by the category of the (un)touchable, but they do not manage to realise it because of the fantasmatic constitution of a myth. They do not manage to sustain the deficiency of touch that would maintain desire and keep love in its status of not-all. Rather, they follow the fantasy of the melting of the two entities into one, the nebulous idea of a totality, as Lacan would put it, for which they lose everything: touch, desire, and life. The fantasy that leads Pyramus and Thisbe to choose the too much of a touch brings them not love, but death.

The materialist turn of Aristophanes's vision of love suspends the fantasy and thereby removes the veil that covers the brutality (or brute materiality) of the mechanism of forced choice: we are not choosing between the unfulfilment of love in life and its fulfilment after death, we are choosing between the unfulfilment of love in life and death. We are not choosing between not-all and all, we are choosing between not-all (which is unbearable) and nothing. From this angle, the master's choice —all

²⁹ Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 205. See Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).

or *nothing!*—turns out to be naive and vain; just as it is, for Lacan, the idea of an absolute, driving the history of philosophy from Plato to Hegel. For it is not about all or nothing: it is about not-all. Therefore, from the perspective of desire driving the category of the (un)touchable, the only choice is the slave's choice: to choose to touch it in such a way that we cannot touch it. Pyramus and Thisbe's choice is, on the contrary, the naive choice of the master: all or nothing, led by the fantasmatic idea of totality (the two united into one) and absolute love. It is only the emergence of the Cartesian subject that penetrates the self-sufficient discourse of the master brought about by the history of philosophy and opens a space for not-all. It opens a space for the choice of the barred subject: the choice of the slave.

The Cartesian Subject and the Unconscious Doubt

The subject of the unconscious is neither a living person nor a substance nor a cognising being, but, according to Lacan, “the Cartesian subject, who appears at the moment when doubt is recognized as certainty,”³⁰ with one difference: that in psychoanalysis, the base of this subject turns out to be “wider, but, at the same time much more amenable to the certainty that eludes it.”³¹ The wider base of the Cartesian subject of psychoanalysis is the unconscious, which is defined by Lacan as “the sum of the effects of speech on a subject.”³² “*Desidero* is the Freudian *cogito*,”³³ Lacan claims: anything that seems to issue from a conscious reason is always in function of an unconscious desire.

The key issue here is the idea of the moment when doubt recognises itself as certainty—this is the moment of the emergence of the subject within the signifying chain. Of course, this supposition is paradoxical: how can doubt ever recognise itself as certainty? For in the moment in which it recognises itself as certainty, there is no more doubt. However, albeit impossible, this constellation is not a closure, but rather an opening. Paradox as a mental tool turns the impasse into the stem cell of thought. In both *Repetition* and *Philosophical Crumbs*, Kierkegaard does not consider paradox to be a hindrance to thought, but rather a revelation of the only legitimate field of thought: a paradox is nothing but the very liveliness of thought; it is only in a paradox that thought actually comes across itself (but precisely in coming apart):

One should not think ill though of paradoxes, because the paradox is the passion of thought and a thinker without a paradox is like a lover without passion: a poor model. But the highest power of every passion is to will its own annihilation. Thus it is also the highest passion of the under-

³⁰ Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 126.

³¹ Lacan, 126.

³² Lacan, 126.

³³ Lacan, 154.

standing to desire an obstacle, despite the fact that the obstacle in one way or another may be its downfall. This is the highest paradox of thought, to want to discover something it cannot think.³⁴

“What truth then is left? Perhaps this alone, that nothing is certain.”³⁵ In his *Meditations*, Descartes’s methodical doubt, which begins by attacking sense-perception, radically questioning it through the argument from dreaming, and undermining knowledge and all rational operations through the introduction of the deceptive evil demon, ends up at the point when doubt recognises itself as certainty: “Beyond doubt then, I also exist, if he is deceiving me; and he can deceive me all he likes, but he will never bring it about that I should be nothing as long as I think I am something.”³⁶ As this recognition is a rational and conscious operation, it serves as a firm starting point for building an argument for the existence of thought, knowledge, the physical world, and God. It is precisely through the self-recognition of doubt as a rational operation that doubt can be set as certainty: I doubt, therefore I think (and therefore I am)—I can be certain of that.³⁷

Lacan goes a step further in setting up the point of emergence of the Cartesian subject. Emerging in the unconscious, the subject of psychoanalysis cannot establish itself through the self-recognition of doubt as a rational operation and thereby turn doubt into the self-certainty of the conscious “I.” For the conscious “I” is no point of reference for the Cartesian subject of psychoanalysis (there is no “I think,” it is always “it thinks instead of us”). The emergence of the psychoanalytical subject is defined by Lacan as a *missed encounter*: by definition, the subject cannot meet itself, it can never recognise itself as it is. It only exists in a slip of signification, in a failure of every assertion and enthronement on a fixed place. For Lacan, the moment when doubt recognises itself as certainty must be taken as it is: as a paradoxical, impossible constellation. In the moment of the self-recognition as certainty, doubt is no more. This is exactly the moment of the missed encounter of the subject: in the moment of its self-recognition, the subject is no more. Certainty is based on the function of the impossible.

The constitution of the psychoanalytic subject is essentially determined by a certain leap of causality. It is precisely this inherent impossibility, which does not allow things to combine in a causal chain, but also does not allow them to surrender to coincidence, that determines the function of the *limping cause* operating in the unconscious. The limping cause is a lost cause, but not a cause that was lost—as a loss, it is essentially at work. It grounds the subject, but it grounds it by way of undermin-

³⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *Repetition and Philosophical Crumbs*, trans. M.G. Piety (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 111.

³⁵ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from Objections and Replies*, trans. Michael Moriarty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 18.

³⁶ Descartes, 18.

³⁷ Descartes’s famous phrase *cogito ergo sum* originally appeared in French in his *Discourse on the Method* and later in Latin in his *Principles of Philosophy*.

ing the ground itself. It grounds it in the gap that always establishes a certain delay between cause and effect and thereby prevents the subject from arising as an effect of a causal series structuring its history.³⁸ The function of the impossible, this is the unconscious cause:

At this point, I should define unconscious cause, neither as an existent, nor as a *ouk on*, a non-existent—as, I believe Henri Ey does, a non-existent of possibility. It is a *mē on* of the prohibition that brings to being an existent in spite of its non-advent, it is a function of the impossible on which a certainty is based.³⁹

In psychoanalysis, the moment when doubt recognises itself as certainty is the birth-place of desire. Doubt as a rational operation is only a consequence of a doubt that concerns a slip in the institution of a subject in the locus of *desidero*. In his analysis of obsessive neurosis in *Rat Man*, Freud describes doubt as the patient's "internal perception of his own indecision, which, in consequence of the inhibition of his love by his hatred, takes possession of him in the face of every intended action."⁴⁰ This doubt, Freud claims, is actually a doubt in one's own (capability of) love: love, "which ought to be the most certain thing in his whole mind."⁴¹ Something that should be intimately most certain becomes the target of doubt—Freud's formula exactly matches Descartes's formula, with one important difference: there is a shift from *cogito* to *desidero*. From the certainty of the conscious "I," the Cartesian subject of psychoanalysis moves to the certainty of unconscious desire. And only here, in the non-localisable locus of desire, does the Cartesian subject truly meet itself, in a meeting that is always missed. And precisely here, in this misrecognition, doubt recognises itself as a certainty: the only certainty is uncertainty. We are where we are no more. In the moment of *aphanisis*, of its own disappearance, a subject emerges.

Only by finding itself in this unenviable situation can the Cartesian subject of the unconscious become the doubtful subjectivity of the conscious "I": "A man who doubts in his own love may, or rather *must*, doubt every lesser thing."⁴² And, Freud continues, when a neurotic patient reveals "the weak spot in the security of our mental life," the untrustworthiness of memory, can, with its help, "extend his doubt over everything, even over actions which have already been performed".⁴³

³⁸ See Bara Kolenc, "Paradoxes of the Limping Cause in Kierkegaard, Hegel and Lacan," *S: Journal of the Circle for Lacanian Ideology Critique* 11 (2018): 90–108.

³⁹ Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 128.

⁴⁰ Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume X, Two Case Histories: "Little Hans" and the "Rat Man"*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955), 241.

⁴¹ Freud, 241.

⁴² Freud, 241.

⁴³ Freud, 243.

The Installment of *Haptic Scepticism*

From the aspect of the foundation of the Cartesian subject in the locus of *desidero*, we can consider doubt as a rational procedure or a tool of thought that (inevitably) stems from uncertainty and hesitation, which accompany the mechanism of desire. In this sense, the “if” does not really stand for the good of knowledge, but for the good of maintaining the desire.

Lacan’s criticism of Aristophanes’s myth somehow retroactively echoes in the classical sceptical reading of the *Symposium*. Aristophanes asks: “If we could be reunited with our other half, wouldn’t this be the happiest moment?”⁴⁴ Diotima later echoes his question: “If someone could gaze directly into the form of Beauty, wouldn’t this be the most amazing experience?”⁴⁵ Dogmatic readings of Plato are grounded in these passages, which are used to reinforce Plato’s theory of the forms. However, a sceptical reading of the *Symposium* would stress the “if” in Aristophanes’s and Diotima’s questions. The “if” introduces uncertainty to the goal of wholeness.

Pyrrhonian scepticism emphasised the undecidability of equipollence (*isostheneia*) that calls for the suspension of judgement (*epochē*). *Isostheneia* is the experience of paralysis between two equally appealing but contradictory experiences. Out of this paralysis comes the suspension of judgement. Pyrrhonian sceptics refused to take the dogmatic position of Academic scepticism (the position that knowledge was not possible) on any issue, including scepticism itself. If the dogmatic position that knowledge is not possible is suspended, this means that exactly in the suspension of this judgement, knowledge as such is possible: not in the form of a judgement, but in the form of *skepsis* as investigation. The paralysis should therefore not be seen as destructive, but rather as the constitutive moment of thought. It paralyses the subject, but precisely in doing so, it also pushes him forward.

Following the Cartesian subject of psychoanalysis, we can deploy *isostheneia* towards the function of desire as such: in this case, we can claim that the undecidability of equipollence is not only a tool of a rational thought, but that it is also present in a subject’s unconscious structure. In the sceptical reading of the *Symposium*, stressing the moment of uncertainty in Aristophanes’s and Diotima’s questions, we can therefore trace the moment of doubt which is not only inscribed in the realm of knowledge, but rather stems from the function of desire in the unconscious. From this perspective, a sceptical reading of the *Symposium* would not only concern the rational objection to Aristophanes’s myth—What if, in case we could be reunited with our other half, this wouldn’t be the happiest moment?—but it would lead to a more radical proposition: that the becoming one is not the structure of love, but it is rather the structure of death.

⁴⁴ Plato, *Symposium*, 56.

⁴⁵ Plato, 56.

The suspension of judgement would thereby be extended to the suspension of any form of cognition that tends to establish itself as something fixed and self-identical; that is, to the suspension of any form of closed oneness into which no otherness can penetrate. Hence, the moment of paralysis would not only be considered a tool of *skepsis* as investigation, but rather a necessary consequence of a more fundamental *skepsis* that drives the constitution of subjectivity on the level that is prior to the self-recognition of this subjectivity within a conscious thought. In this sense, the paralysis marks exactly the moment when doubt recognises itself as certainty.

Following that, *skepsis* can be compared to what Freud called a *predilection for uncertainty*: the phenomenon that he particularly addressed in his investigation of obsessional neurosis. In hesitation as an unconscious procedure, Freud claims, the obsessive is paralysed by ambivalence, immobilised by two instinctual impulses directed at the same object.⁴⁶ Following the proposition of a more fundamental *skepsis* that drives the constitution of subjectivity in the unconscious, we can not only deploy the predilection for uncertainty in the particular case of obsessive neurosis, but we can rather take it as the structure of desire as such.

It is precisely this hesitation, a paralysis not only within the realm of thought, but within the realm of desire in the first place, that echoes in the spatio-temporal paradox of touch, which inhabits the category of the (un)touchable. As we have seen in the second section of this chapter, the function of desire always already engages touch: a desire is a desire for the object. It is a desire to touch the object, to possess the object, to become (one with) the object. It is a desire to shrink the distance and turn it into oneness. But at the same time, desire can only sustain itself through the impossibility of grasping the object, the impossibility of ever overcoming the distance between the desiring subject and its object: in the function of sustaining desire (and thereby sustaining the Cartesian subjectivity as *desidero*), the object always turns out to be the elusive *object a*, always lacking in its place. Paralysis freezes the desiring subject, who is fatally caught in the equipollence between the urge to touch and fulfill desire (and thus put desire itself to death) on the one hand and the urge to withhold touch and perpetuate desire in its unfulfilment on the other.

Moreover, we can argue that the category of the (un)touchable is inscribed in the very procedure of doubt. Let us take the moment when doubt recognises itself as certainty as a certain kind of a conceptual grasping, as a kind of touch that is between doubt and certainty. As we have seen in the previous section, this moment marks a missed encounter: as long as there is doubt, there is no certainty, but as soon as doubt recognises itself as certainty, doubt is no more. In the terms of classical logic, doubt and certainty are considered to be in direct opposition, which means that touch between them would nullify one of them: either they are separated as *the two*, or one of them will disappear within the other. However, even if their connection requires the nullification of one of them, it nevertheless brings a state of one-

⁴⁶ See Freud, "Rat Man."

ness: even if one is eaten by the other, they technically still become *one*. This means that structurally (from the perspective of the category of the (un)touchable), it makes no difference whether the two agents of touch are logically considered to be in opposition or not. The spatio-temporal paradox of touch stays the same, stuck within the temporality of the *not yet* and the *always already* and the spatiality of the in-between distance and proximity, separation and connection.

However, exactly within this paradox, there is a certain trace of possibility inscribed in this very impossibility: the impossible touch between doubt and certainty is precisely the condition of possibility of their encounter. For paradox is, to paraphrase Kierkegaard again, a situation where *thought comes across itself in going apart* and realises the moment when doubt recognises itself as certainty. Doubt and certainty can touch each other precisely through their untouchability—and it is therein, within their (un)touchability, that the birthplace of both subjectivity and desire, and the point of emergence of both *cogito* and *desidero*, or, to be more precise, of *cogito as desidero*, may be found.

For Descartes, touch is the first of the senses to be subjected to the rational operation of methodical doubt. After reaching the point when doubt recognises itself as certainty, the realm of the senses is built up again as belonging to the *res extensa*, where touch (again) engages the function of the experiential guarantor (or examiner) of truth and of human existence (and, hence, the existence of the world). Taking into account *desidero* as Lacanian *cogito*, which raises the supposition that certainty is based on the function of the impossible, we should suppose that the category of the (un)touchable, where touch engages the function of desire, itself operates within the constitution of certainty as impossible—not being (rationally) certain of that impossibility, but being only possible in its own impossibility.

This brings us to the core idea of haptic scepticism, where touch does not function as an experiential examiner of truth (pinch me so that I know I am not dreaming)—that is, as a tool of methodical doubt (senses are deceptive)—but rather as a structural operator of a more fundamental doubt that is at work in the unconscious. Being intrinsically connected to the function of desire (desire is a desire to grasp the object), touch stems from uncertainty not as a state of weakness—which needs to be repaired and overcome by certainties such as evidence, proofs, justifications, general truths, beliefs, or habits—but from uncertainty as a necessary openness and non-wholeness of mind processes, as a fundamental *skepsis*, which is a pre-condition of any rational thought and decision-making, including doubt as a rational procedure, and is as such the very constitutive process of subjectivity. In the approach of haptic scepticism, touch will therefore not help to constitute the world of certainty and experiential reality, but will, quite the opposite, help to deconstruct any certainty in order to proceed towards uncertainties and hesitations which drive our thoughts and desires in the unconscious.

Beyond Fantasy: Uncertainty and Hesitation as the Condition of Love

The final dramatic twist in the story of Pyramus and Thisbe revolves around a *fatal mistake*: Pyramus kills himself because he wrongly supposes Thisbe to be dead. This mistake is certainly fatal, but it is also stupid. The dramatic highlight of the entire plot is based upon the very naive assumption that the bloodied veil is firm proof of Thisbe's death. Pyramus is certain of this. But, as we have seen before, if there is no moment of doubt, then there is no space for certainty, for doubt is the very locus where certainty recognises itself as certainty; doubt is the necessary condition of certainty, of its self-recognition. Moreover, as an inevitable counterpart of certainty, doubt is a necessary condition of cognition as such: exactly therein lies the core idea of Cartesian subjectivity.

Pyramus's conviction of Thisbe's death should therefore not be called certainty, but rather a plain unquestioned *belief*. Pyramus is not certain of Thisbe's death; rather, he simply believes that she has been torn apart by the beast. A belief is a state without doubt, which is not an apparent totality of certainty, but rather its direct opposite, an absolute absence of certainty. Hence, the true opposite of certainty is not uncertainty, but belief, a plain, undoubtful conviction. On the contrary, however, uncertainty, inscribed in the operation of doubt, is the inner gap within the constitution of certainty, which is its positive condition of possibility.

Moreover, if we take into account the Cartesian subject of psychoanalysis, the apparent totality of certainty (i.e., a plain belief) can only be possible not just as an absence of recognition, but also as an absence of desire. And what, in this constellation, is the absence of desire? It is an absolute, unquestioned belief in one's own love. Pyramus is too convinced of his love (and thereby also Thisbe's love, as the nature of desire is the desire of the other), and this is what is truly fatal. It is not a course of events or a fatal mistake that kills Thisbe: it is Pyramus's unquestioned conviction of their love. Because he does not doubt their love, he does not allow himself to doubt the evidence of Thisbe's death. There is no single moment of doubt—Wait a minute, what *if* Thisbe is just being unfaithful to me? What *if* this is a trap? What *if* she wants me to see her bloodied veil to make me think she is dead? Why would she do that? For I know she loves me unconditionally. But ... What *if*, nevertheless ...? Or, what *if* the veil is not hers, what *if* there was another woman here, who unluckily became an unexpected victim of the lioness? What *if* another woman was waiting here for me? What *if* I actually wanted another woman to be waiting here for me? What *if* I do not want Thisbe at all? Or perhaps the scenario is completely different: What *if* somebody prevented Thisbe from coming here, took her veil, and coloured it red to make me think that she is dead and eventually cause me to kill myself? What *if*—uncertainty has no end. This endless doubt is acted out, performed as *hesitation*, which, as Freud would put it, serves to delay action indefinitely. Perhaps a single moment of hesitation would be just enough to save the lovers' lives, one brief

moment of paralysis that would stall Pyramus's hand and allow Thisbe to appear before him just before he stabs himself. A moment of their encounter, at last. A moment of their temptation that would finally be loaded upon their shoulders, without any physical obstacle to serve as an excuse not to face doubt, inscribed in their desire.

Pyramus and Thisbe's love is certainly fatal, but it is not so because of the hindrances to it, as it is commonly interpreted. On the contrary, it is fatal exactly because of the *absence of an inner hindrance, an impossibility intrinsic to love*. The outer hindrances—the families' ban, the wall, the beast, the unhappy course of events—are there not to prevent love, but to veil the fact that there is no love, that there is no inner hindrance, no uncertainty that would empower the two young people's desire. Instead of the two lovers facing the moment of doubt once they leave the wall, the wall is replaced by a new obstacle, the lioness, and this again is replaced by a new one, the death of Pyramus. It is fatal because it is totally unquestioned. In the entirety of Ovid's sequence, there is not a single "if" clause. *If* we remove the wall, will we still love each other? *If* we avoid the outer obstacle, will we still want to touch?

The love of Pyramus and Thisbe is not impossible because they do not manage to touch each other. It is impossible because they do not doubt. Their love is impossible because it is just too possible. There is no hesitation and uncertainty that would maintain desire and keep their relationship within the dialectics of the *(un)touchable*. A series of physical obstacles is not there to represent an absolute love which could not be realised because of their unhappy circumstances; it is there to veil the very fact that there is no absolute love, that love is always on the side of a non-whole, that it is always traversed by a gap. It is there to veil the fact that *the absolute* is not on the side of love, but on the side of death: death not as a fantasy of an eternal unity of the two souls, but as a radical objectification of the two corpses, falling one on top of the other and turning into a single indistinct pile of flesh.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I aimed to ground haptic scepticism on two conceptual pillars. The first pillar is the idea that touch as a structural (rather than empirical) phenomenon underlies the configuration of subjectivity. This idea was supported by the installment of doubt as a function of desire that drives modern subjectivity (i.e., the Cartesian subject of the unconscious) on the one hand and a demonstration of the intrinsic relation between touch and desire on the other. As a structural phenomenon, touch is therefore always related to doubt. The second pillar is the argument about the fundamental mechanism of doubt (as *skepsis*) which, intertwined with the function of desire and the mechanism of touch in the unconscious, precedes doubt as a rational procedure, which is the basic principle of the line of modern scepticism stemming from the Cartesian tradition. From this perspective, I conclude that uncer-

tainty and hesitation should not be seen as destructive to thought, but rather as constitutive of it.

Bringing these two pillars together, I aimed to demonstrate how, through the aspect of haptic scepticism, touch is not engaged as a tool of methodical doubt, but is rather employed as a structural operator of a more fundamental doubt that is at work in the unconscious. Through this approach, touch proves not to be a function of a constitution of the world of certainties, but rather a function of an insistence on uncertainties and hesitations, which drive our thoughts and desires in the unconscious and are essential for the constitution of subjectivity.

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