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# THEOLOGY AFTER LACAN

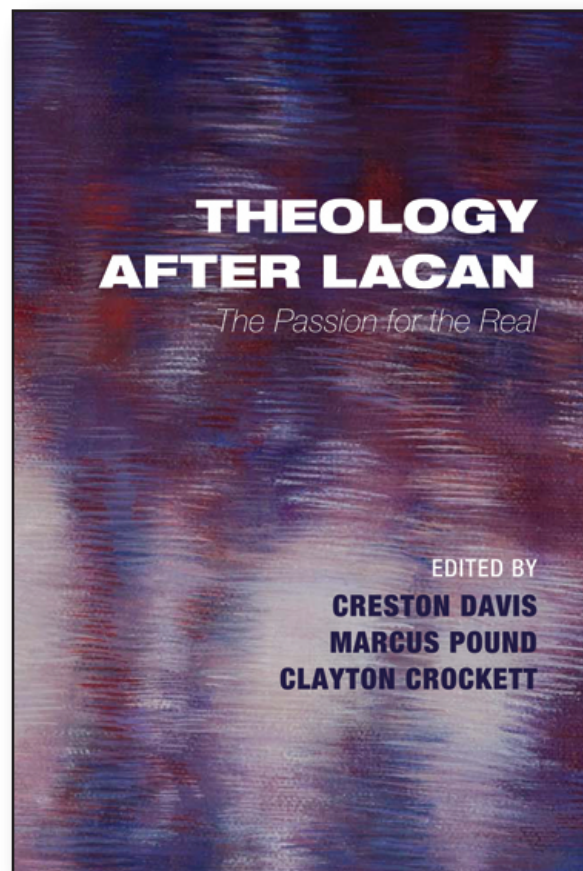
*The Passion for the Real*

EDITED BY **CRESTON DAVIS, MARCUS POUND, CLAYTON CROCKETT**

This groundbreaking volume highlights the contemporary relevance of Jacques Lacan (1901–1981), whose linguistic reworking of Freudian analysis radicalized both psychoanalysis and its approach to theology. Part I: Lacan, Religion, and Others explores the application of Lacan's thought to the phenomena of religion. Part II: Theology and the Other Lacan explores and develops theology in light of Lacan. In both cases, a central place is given to Lacan's exposition of the *real*, thereby reflecting the impact of his later work. Contributors include some of the most renowned readers and influential academics in their respective fields: Tina Beattie, Lorenzo Chiesa, Clayton Crockett, Creston Davis, Adrian Johnston, Katerina Kolozova, Thomas Lynch, Marcus Pound, Carl Raschke, Kenneth Reinhard, Mario D'Amato, Noelle Vahanian, and Slavoj Žižek. Topics traverse culture, art, philosophy, and politics, as well as providing critical exegesis of Lacan's most gnomic utterances on theology, including "The Triumph of Religion."

"This volume, *Theology after Lacan*, contains essays from some of the world's most recognized theology and cultural theorists implicated in contemporary psychoanalysis and rigorously advances the conversation about the intimate intersection that binds religion and psychoanalysis intriguingly together."

—Bracha L. Ettinger, author of *The Matrixial Borderspace*



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Creston Davis,  
Marcus Pound,  
and  
Clayton Crockett



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THEOLOGY AFTER LACAN  
The Passion for the Real

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## Introduction

### Traversing the Theological Fantasy

CRESTON DAVIS, MARCUS POUND,  
AND CLAYTON CROCKETT

#### The Real Introduction

FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY'S PROTAGONIST IN *Notes from Underground* nicely identifies the central thesis of this book, namely, that theology in the wake of Lacanian psychoanalysis is devoid of the "the big Other," i.e., a guarantee that a system of belief is forever secured by a master-signifier around which all meaning takes its place. Indeed, this book reverses this thesis: Only after Lacan can theology mean anything at all. It is precisely by rejecting the idol of God's necessity (*deus ex machina*) that theology can only make sense in and through the wild untamable flux and fury of an uncontrollable contingency. Radical contingency grounds the truth of an infinite faith beyond our primordial drive and instinct to control all things—like Aaron's golden calf that attempts to hijack the infinite in terms of a master-signifier into which all our longings and desire can be cast upon ever so easily. With our hands washed free of faith by controlling the absolute, the desire for living is denuded and life is substituted by believing in a fake god, the big Other. In short, Lacanian psychoanalysis diagnoses the symptom inherent in theology, namely, a symptom that relies upon the hidden idol underneath its golden veneer. Thus the very term *theology* is metonymic in that it refers to a structure that unconsciously misnames its own truth, the truth of the infinite that is substituted for a fake reality of a false God of the absolute.

## 2 Theology after Lacan

One of the principle goals of the psychoanalytic method is to release repressed traumatic experiences so that those experiences can be articulated and desire flows again. It is our contention that traditional theology has been the *raison d'être* for trauma, (the impossible demands of the Superego, The Paternal Father, the Big Other, God, etc.) which needs to be drained into the symbolic order so that desire once again flows through contingency, otherness, difference, and ultimately love. In treatment, the analyst listens “sideways” for shifts in tone, sounds, words, fixated images, stutters, and metonymic displacement in order to integrate the subject deeper into their fantasy, what Bruce Fink calls “traversing the fantasy.”<sup>1</sup> In a way, Post-Lacanian theology traverses the fantasy of an absolute God in order to live into the calling of a radically contingent love; or, that which we have no control over and yet desire. If you like, we want to rename theology as a flow of desire devoid of the big Other, a desire that gives birth to an ethics beyond morals, and to a connection beyond the centered Ego at home with itself.

Traditional theology has never been very good about coming unstuck. Indeed it has a tendency for a bi-polar logic wherein it either raises to a level beyond critique, solidifying in absolute authoritarianism (mania), or else it becomes drained of all authority (depression). We are all too familiar with theological mania, and the 1960s so-called death of God theology gave birth to this depressive form of theology in which God was simply dismissed only to be replaced with the Ego as Absolute devoid of community, difference, and infinite contingency. What we are proposing is a method of traversal, namely, traverse the theological fantasy in a manner that neither slips into mania (pure enjoyment, authoritarianism) nor depression (no enjoyment, depression), but rather the release of desire that won't kill itself, but live in-and-through-itself. But how does one traverse this theological deadlock? The answer this book suggests is through Lacanian psychoanalysis. To this end, we would like to draw on Fyodor Dostoevsky's example about how he proposes to traverse the theological fantasy.

In his powerful novella *Notes from Underground*, Dostoevsky gives a voice to a suppressed language, i.e., the “underground” voice that functions like the unconscious, or in Lacanian terms, the “order of the Real.” In the French language, the “Real” (*Reel*) means “to stop short of the actual object”; indeed “the order of the real” for Lacan inherently resists symbolization. The Real is that which cannot be encased in language. “The real is impossible” as Lacan says, in that it cannot be represented in language, but is nevertheless present in its very absence of the act of trying to symbolize it. So the very

1. Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) 27.

use of language itself inherently creates a double-bind: language is necessary in order to communicate ideas, concepts, and desires, yet, in the very use of language, something always gets lost, and escapes the grasp of symbolizing those very ideas that we want to communicate. This loss is the presence of the Real in its very absence. In this way, Lacan identifies a paradox at work in the very use of language—in trying to communicate, we can only do so through a necessary *miscommunication*—and the “missing” part is that which haunts every word—it is the hidden *other* found in language itself haunting it like a ghost. So to get to the hidden (otherness) found within language, which is the very process of traversal, Lacan proposes a method not of direct engagement with language, but rather an *indirect* avenue of approach. This approach must therefore look for desire, the hidden otherness, in slips of the tongue, in unlocking trauma, sideways, if you will.

Exposing the Real can thus take on different formulations, genres, and mishaps. One way to attempt to expose the Real is through literature, and one of the great masters of this genre is Dostoevsky and his brilliant novella, *Notes from Underground*. We submit that Dostoevsky represents an extraordinary example of psychoanalytical treatment, that is, traversing the theological fantasy. The title of the work itself, *Zapiski iz podpol'ya* (also translated as *Letters from the Underworld*), immediately splits the world up into two parts: there is your standard “world” or *status quo*, the conscious world, and then there is the “sub-world,” the world beneath consciousness, that is, the unconscious world. The main thrust of the novella then is to try to express the unconscious world in the language of the conventional dog-eat-dog world. Interestingly enough, Dostoevsky wrote the novella as an attack both against Nikolai Chernyshevsky’s defense of a utopian, utilitarian novel *What Is to Be Done?*, as well as Western European philosophy, especially targeting Kant’s purely rational universe. But in his attack against determinism in all its forms, philosophical, traditional and social pressures to conform, he articulates what many consider to be the first existential novel.

What you see in this short novel is a struggle at the most fundamental level of existence; it is a struggle above all in trying to find the language for expressing the inexpressible—the Real. The key term here is *trying* to express the Real, but knowing all the while that it is impossible to do so. It is like Sisyphus, a crowned king condemned to repeating the seamlessly absurd act of rolling a boulder up the side of a mountain only to watch the valley swallow the boulder up again. Sisyphus’s punishment was repeating this meaningless act forever. But as Albert Camus masterfully concludes in his *Myth of Sisyphus*, what matters most of all in life is not finding meaning as a fixed thing (the big Other), but living the fullest life possible given the non-existence of fixed meaning itself.



#### 4 Theology after Lacan

Camus thus echoes Dostoevsky's realization that expressing the Real is impossible; nevertheless one committed to a true, authentic life is compelled to try to express the inexpressible *anyway*. And that is the basic matrix that structures *Notes from Underground*. Further, the very matrix itself thus gives rise to the enigmatic protagonist, "The Underground Man" who opens the novel in the Imaginary register: "I am a sick man. . . . I am a wicked man. An unattractive man."<sup>2</sup> The very appearance of a self-reflective and conscious ego "I" that appears in the midst of the conscious "everyday" world is deeply disturbing to the reader, and a product of the Symbolic Order itself, for as Dostoevsky himself maintains: ". . . such persons as the writer of such notes (i.e., the Underground Man) not only may but even must exist in our society, taking into consideration the circumstances under which our society (i.e., language) has generally been formed."<sup>3</sup> In other words, what makes the Underground Man so disturbing is that he calls attention to the very sickness of what society and tradition have fashioned, namely, a world without a conscience, a world, if you will, that systematically enacts and socially reproduces<sup>4</sup> repression of the unconscious/Real as such. Said differently, society and tradition, according to the Underground Man, have a vested interest in *not* exposing the absence of a center point of *static* meaning around which all social mores take their place and into which the subject is determined as if they are a fixed, infinite object at home in the house of the "ego."

The Underground Man impolitely deconstructs our assumptions and tacit presupposition about meaning. The act of socially repressing the truth of the void of our existence is precisely what gives rise to boredom and creates action without substance and truth.

I emphatically repeat: ingenuous people and active figures are active simply because they are dull and narrow-minded . . . [And] . . . as a consequence of their narrow-mindedness, they take the most immediate and secondary causes for the primary ones, and thus become convinced more quickly and easily than others that they have found an indisputable basis for their doings, and so they feel at ease. . . . For in order to begin to act, one must first be completely at ease, so that no more doubts remain.<sup>5</sup>

2. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage, 1993) 3.

3. See *ibid.*, Dostoevsky's "Author's Note" on the bottom of page 5.

4. This is Louis Althusser's basic question in his famous essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (in *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster [Monthly Review Press, 1971]). Althusser states, "The Ultimate condition of production [i.e., social formation via language] is therefore the reproduction of the conditions of production" (85).

5. Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, 17–18.

Society thus rests on the notion of fake peace so as to justify their actions that are morally acceptable to do. Doubt itself is repressed out of existence so one's social actions are not based on the truth of our radical contingency, but rather on a false sense of a master-signifier that neutralizes risk, openness, and real personality, even love. To this problem, the Underground Man asks a series of disturbing but necessary questions about our subjective contingency: "Well, and how am I, for example, to set myself at ease? Where are the primary causes on which I can rest, where are my bases? Where am I going to get them?" And his answer reveals less a stability than a continual and infinite growth, for he "... exercises thinking, and, consequently, for me [the Underground Man] every primary cause immediately drags with it yet another, still more primary one, and so on *ad infinitum*."<sup>6</sup>

The honesty with which the Underground Man penetrates beyond the social crust of consciousness reveals a contradiction: everyday social consciousness is false consciousness because it rests on a premise that cannot hold up under the conditions of "thinking" that is, living a true and authentic life in the face of the void. This is the traumatic act of "traversing the fantasy." Dostoevsky's Underground Man unveils a deeper more profound logic operating beneath the surface (like the unconscious) that society projects and maintains. This unveiling by no means captures the Real (this is impossible), but it does challenge the categorical social—desire to control human beings by means of a purely rational, mathematical measurement. However, as the Underground Man says, "All man needs is independent volition, whatever that independence might cost and wherever it might lead."<sup>7</sup>

It is not new knowledge that what the Underground Man is pointing out with regard to social logic is intimately related to the highs and lows of bi-polar disorder in general as discussed above. Theology in the twentieth century has reached an apex of both authoritarianism and fundamentalism in absolute terms (mania), as well as being reduced to a nominalist disinterestedness (depression), i.e., the death of God theology as well as a general laziness that collapses into an indifference toward all possibility of meaning making. What this book is proposing above all an attempt to traverse the theological fantasy by one's own life lived in the wake of an infinite power beyond the purely rational on the one hand and apathy on the other. The psychoanalytic structure of Lacan's through, we surmise, gives us the matrix of traversing the theological fantasy.

6. Ibid., 18.

7. Dostoyevsky, *Notes from Underground*, 24 (different translation—Penguin Classics).

## 6 Theology after Lacan

### The Symbolic Introduction

How then does this collection sit within the current of scholarship on Lacan and theology? In many respects this collection is both a tribute *to* and critique *of* the first such collection to expressly treat the work of Lacan and theology in tandem: *Lacan and Theological Discourse* (1989).<sup>8</sup> For those intellectual pioneers, including Carl Raschke, Mark C. Taylor, Charles Winquist, and Edith Wyschogrod, the chief import of Lacan was his critique of the ego as an alienating form of defense against desire (i.e., lack). Their orientation was distinctly Heideggerian, but they took their cue from Derrida and Levinas as well. In the eyes of these authors Lacan was a thinker of “Otherness,” forcing theology, in the words of Charles Winquist, “to seriously assess the problematic of its own textuality”; Lacan reminds us that all theological discourse is a form of speech and it therefore speaks a lack.<sup>9</sup>

Derrida had already made connection between his philosophy of *différance* and negative theology, as had Lacan concerning his own work,<sup>10</sup> and it was a short step from there on the part of theologians to couple postmodern “Otherness” with the biblical injunction against idolatry. As Catherine Clément put it: a Lacanian theology would be a

miss-tical *a/theology*, [is] one that would involve real risks. . . . For Lacanian analysis “does not provoke any triumph of self-awareness,” as Roudinseco rightly points out. “It uncovers, on the contrary, a process of decentering, in which the subject delves . . . into the loss of his mastery.”<sup>11</sup>

By ceding mastery theology could become less concerned with defending existing doctrine to become instead an “ethical experiment in letting things be in their otherness.”<sup>12</sup>

Given that the barb of Lacan’s critique was aimed at American ego-psychology, it is understandable that the American contributors to *Lacan and Theological Discourse* made the critique of the ego their central point. Through attenuation of desire, reified theological forms are opened out into the uncertain play of the symbolic. In this sense their work may be

8. *Lacan and Theological Discourse*, ed. Edith Wyschogrod et al. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

9. Charles Winquist, “Lacan and Theological discourse,” in *ibid.*, 26–38, 32.

10. Jacques Lacan, “Seminar XIV, Logic of Phantasy,” trans. Cormac Gallagher (unpublished manuscript), 25.1.67, lecture ix, 3.

11. Catherine Clément, *The Lives and Legends of Jacques Lacan*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983) 144.

12. Winquist, “Lacan and Theological Discourse,” 31.

characterized in terms of discourse formation; i.e., their concern is the way theology is falsely unified through institutional forms when desire is lost sight of.

However, such an approach could easily become drained of all authority or institutional mooring, pushing a Lacanian theology into a very private space, a point succinctly put by David Crownfield in the collection when he says that these theologians “locate theological discourse in the . . . imaginary, in the isolation of the solitary and marginal wanderer without context or community.”<sup>13</sup>

Part of the problem was material: the accessibility of the primary sources themselves. One notes in the first instance, and with few exceptions, the range of primary material consulted in *Lacan and Theological Discourse* amounts to little more than Alan Sheridan’s selections from *Écrits*; Jacqueline Rose’s selections and translations from *Seminar XX*, published under the title *Feminine Sexuality*; *Seminar XI*, the first edited and published Seminar; and Anthony Wilden’s critical edition of “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis.”<sup>14</sup>

The impact of this limited selection is acutely felt in Mark C. Taylor’s contribution. He pits Lacan against Lacan, reading the later seminar “God and Woman’s *jouissance*” against Lacan’s early work on law and the name-of-the-father.<sup>15</sup> In the later work, Lacan suggests there must be a specifically female *jouissance* not prey to the economy of patriarchy, which Taylor identified with the early work.<sup>16</sup> However, missing from the debate is any reference to the formulas of sexuation around which discussion of gender revolves in the later Lacan.

If part of the problem was the lack of texts, this was further compounded by the texts that were available. To take *Écrits* as an initial example, first: even in the French original the text only covered the period up to 1966; second: neither the French nor English editions showed much regard for any chronological order—the French edition starts with an essay from 1966, followed by one from 1955. All of this conspired to offer up, as David Macey has argued, a neatly homogenous picture of Lacan.<sup>17</sup>

13. David Crownfield, “Summary of Chapter 1,” in Wyschogrod et al., *Lacan and Theological Discourse*, 38.

14. A. Wilden, *Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).

15. Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XX, Encore: Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge* (New York: Norton, 1999) 64–77.

16. Mark C. Taylor, “Refusal of the Bar,” in Wyschogrod et al., *Lacan and Theological Discourse*, 50.

17. David Macey, *Lacan in Contexts* (London: Verso, 1988) 10.

## 8 Theology after Lacan

This picture was aided by the inclusion of a glossary and index of concepts. These additions to the text, written and compiled by Jacques-Alain Miller, played a crucial role for an earlier generation determining how the text was read, selectively navigating the reader around the text, shutting out some influences while privileging others.

As Miller himself tells us in a series of pointers in which he justifies his inclusion of an index: “in the index, it is the concept that must be looked for, not the word,”<sup>18</sup> and arguably this was his self-stated aim: “forming a system” for the training of analysts. Nonetheless, as Macey argued, *Écrits* appeared a “conceptually homogenous text rather than a collection of papers written over a considerable period of time, with all the shifts and modifications that implies,”<sup>19</sup> and in this way the presentation flattened out the “polysemic complexity” of the work.<sup>20</sup>

However, chiefly, the case to be made is that the lack of easy available *Seminars* and a lack of critical attention to reception of the texts also meant that many of Lacan’s most profound discussions on theology remained out of reach. A case in point, as noted by Cormac Gallagher, is the way that Lacan’s fundamental concepts are often accompanied by a major text or paradigmatic point within the history of thought: Love in transference is accompanied by Plato’s *amalgā* from *Symposium*; the o-object in relation to the gaze is accompanied by Velasquez’s *Las Meninas*; *Antigone* serves as the paradigm for sublimation in tragedy. Yet as Gallagher points out, none of these figures, literary or otherwise, are accorded the importance Lacan gave to Pascal, who remains curiously absent from discussions on the relation of the subject to Other.

What the *Seminars* have brought into view is the way religious and theological traditions are a constant source of reference for Lacan, and in particular, the degree to which theology plays a central structuring role in Western subjectivity for Lacan.

By contrast what we find in the early theological appropriation is a formalisation of Lacan’s work into a central philosophical critique of onto-theology, but little on the central place theological discourse plays within his texts, or the way they later develop. So where early debates about his status were branded in terms of “structuralist,” “post-structuralist,” or “surrealist,” we now increasingly find “Catholic,” “Reformed,” or “Buddhist” versions of Lacan.

18. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete English Translation*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2005) 893.

19. Macey, *Lacan in Contexts*, 13.

20. Elizabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan: An Outline of a Life and a History of a Thought*, trans. Barbara Bray (Cambridge: Polity, 1999) 305.

### Žižek

Central to some of the contributors to this volume is the subsequent reception of Lacan by Slavoj Žižek. Arguably part of Žižek's success has also been, like Miller, to synchronise Lacan's work as a whole into a formal logic, but also and more startlingly, the direct way in which he has brought the later Lacan, by way of Hegel and German idealism, to bear directly on theology, politics, and culture with often surprising results.

Hegel understood the Christian passion in terms of a Godhead who dies absolutely on the cross, kenotically pouring himself out, only to be resurrected both in and as the material world. Henceforth Spirit names not some ethereal animating power, but quite simply the corporal body of the church. All of this makes for a transition from a traditional transcendental framework from which God might be said to participate in reality, to an immanent and dialectical framework according to which God is continually reborn into the things of this world; *traversing the fantasy*.

Speaking of the passion in this way eliminates the need of God to serve as an external guarantor of meaning. In place of the Big Other we get a God who fully abandons himself into his own creation, "fully engaging himself in it up to dying, so that we, humans, are left with no higher Power watching over us, just with the terrible burden of freedom and responsibility for the fate of divine creation, and thus of God himself."<sup>21</sup>

For Žižek, as Cyril O'Regan puts it, the logic of kenosis signals an end to "obfuscation and fetishization, and a liberation into the inexplicable joy and suffering of the world."<sup>22</sup> In this way he links both psychoanalysis and theology with revolutionary praxis. Indeed, he goes as far as to suggest that theology offers the very first critique of ideology in the Biblical figure of Job. Faced with unending suffering, Job refuses the solace offered by the theologians according to which his suffering is given meaning by way of recourse to a metaphysical answer (e.g., you suffer in this life because . . . ); rather he asserts the very meaninglessness of suffering to the extent that even God cannot supply an answer. And because Žižek reads Job as the precursor to Christ, he is able to push the consequences of this logic a little further. Christ's cry of dereliction upon the cross is the point at which God faces up to his own powerlessness: God is an atheist.

As Adam Kotsko has noted, Žižek's approach is in accord with the Protestant death-of-God theology out of which many of the contributions to

21. Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?*, ed. Creston Davis (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009) 25.

22. Cyril O'Regan, "Žižek and Milbank and the Hegelian Death of God," *Modern Theology* 26 (2010) 278–86.

the first collection arose.<sup>23</sup> Consider, for example, Mark C. Taylor's heralding in of postmodernism as a "carnavalesque comedy" in which God is dead, and the incarnated Christ becomes ceaselessly disseminated.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, more recently both Žižek and Thomas Altizer—the father of Protestant death-of-God theology—have mutually endorsed each other's work.<sup>25</sup>

However, unlike his theological contemporaries Žižek does not take the death of God as an event that opens the field up for the "reassertion of the true abyss of Divinity as a spectral promise."<sup>26</sup> Rather, what dies is the "very structuring principle of our entire universe." The logic of kenosis offers a "properly apocalyptic shattering power."<sup>27</sup> And this traumatic power names the event or monstrosity of Christ: the cry of dereliction upon the cross. Žižek's Christology is therefore both orthodox (Christ must actually be God to push the consequences of the logic to its extreme); and exemplary: God's kenotic outpouring becomes the subjective task, emptying the subject of the illusion of a substantial self. In short, Žižek enlists for his emancipatory project all the "perverse twists of redemption through suffering, the death of God, etc., but without God."<sup>28</sup>

What are the implications of this shift in focus? In the first instance this makes for a more subversive edge. If the earlier contributors were seeking to disrupt imaginary identifications in the name of the symbolic through attenuation to desire, Žižek wants to disrupt the symbolic in the name of the Real through attenuation to the Drive (to which we shall return. Second, because Žižek equates the real with religion it follows that his work develops into what may be termed more broadly a political theology. So, while the former thinkers remain largely critical of institutional religion they rarely touch on political theology. By contrast, not only does Žižek critique institutional religion, he critiques the wider social order, albeit by way of theology. To take an example, while Taylor critiques traditional theology in the name of a return to the "goddess," seen from the perspective of Žižek such a return amounts to reinstating the Big Other; instead Žižek makes the

23. Adam Kotsko, "The 'Christian Experience' Continues: On Žižek's Work since *The Parallax View*," *IJŽS Special Issue: Žižek's Theology* 4.4 (2010). <http://zizekstudies.org/index.php/ijzs/article/view/272/365>.

24. Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) 163.

25. Žižek spoke on the same platform with Altizer at the AAR Annual Meeting 2009 and affirmed his similarity with Altizer's Hegelian position on the death of God.

26. Žižek and Milbank, *Monstrosity of Christ*, 260.

27. Ibid.

28. Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (New York: Verso, 2012) 119.



case for the traumatic perversity contained within incarnational logic as the means to a wider social critique.

One may frame the difference Žižek introduces into the reception of Lacan in terms of the shift in Lacan's own work from desire to drive, and their relative object—the o-object or *objet petit a*. As Žižek explains, "in the shift from desire to drive, we pass from the *lost object*, to *loss itself as an object*." Desire strives for an impossible fullness which, forced to renounce, becomes stuck on a partial object; drive however represents more radically the "drive" "to break the All of continuity in which we are embedded."<sup>29</sup>

To put this in theological terms, when God is treated under the rubric of desire, God is taken simply as the impossible object, forever pursued, but also that which forever eludes the subject. This is the God of negative theology in which God's impossible fullness forces the subject to renounce in one way or another any positive predication of God. By contrast, it is precisely the bizarre passionate attachments of faith that highlight for Žižek the point at which "human life is never "just life": humans are not simply alive, they are possessed by a strange drive to enjoy life in excess, passionately attached to a surplus which sticks out and derails the ordinary run of things."<sup>30</sup>

As the above quote highlights, related to the economy of the drive is the coterminous question of enjoyment. From the perspective of desire, enjoyment is endlessly deferred, pertaining as it does to the lost object; however from the perspective of Drive, enjoyment is "satisfied," or rather, a satisfaction is generated from the very repetition of failure experienced *qua* desire. One of the key points Žižek takes from this transition is the transformation that occurs between a failure (desire) and the ability to translate a failure into a success (drive). Žižek's point here is that the shift from desire to drive is of itself a paradigmatic example of the way in which, socio-politically speaking, we can transform "failure into triumph."<sup>31</sup>

Taken together then, it might be said that where earlier theologians took the eccentricities of theology as outmoded, to be jettisoned in favour of the normative ("post-structuralist") discourse on language and the self, Žižek takes the eccentricities of theology, and Christianity in particular, as the very "lost" cause which as such, might save the world.<sup>32</sup>

In his "Extraduction" to *Lacan and Theological Discourse*, David Crownfield closes the book by opening up a future discussion. He points to the relation between Lacan and Kierkegaard: "Lacan's radical diagnosis

29. Ibid., 498.

30. Ibid., 499.

31. Ibid., 498.

32. Ibid., 1010.



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of the self as split, decentred, imaginary, unachievable is reminiscent of Kierkegaard's."<sup>33</sup> However, Kierkegaard is seen to offer a resolution of sorts to the extent that the fractured self is unified through a decision, specifically the "decision of faith [or love] in the God of Jesus Christ."<sup>34</sup>

If, as Alain Badiou has argued, Lacan is "our Hegel,"<sup>35</sup> then Žižek may well, despite Hegelian leanings, be "our Kierkegaard" (a reveller of paradox, and a pugnacious, astute commentator on cultural life)<sup>36</sup>—hence the pre-science of David Crownfield's concluding remarks. However, Žižek sees in the passionate attachment of faith, not a resolution as such—any more than Kierkegaard would have—but rather, after Lacan, a perverse attachment of enjoyment to a kernel of revolutionary thought.

### The Imaginary Introduction

This volume is divided into two parts. Part One is titled "Lacan, Religion and Others," and productively puts Lacan's work in conversation with other philosophers, theologians, and religious figures around the question of religion. Part Two, "Theology and the Other Lacan," more explicitly and intensively imagines what theology might mean or become after traversing the fantasy of its own identity by way of an engagement with Lacan.

The first chapter is by Slavoj Žižek, the most influential philosopher writing today. Žižek's contribution, "*Cogito*, Madness and Religion: Derrida, Foucault and Then Lacan," shows how Kant's reading of Descartes gets repeated and amplified in different ways in Foucault and Derrida. There is an intrinsic madness of the subject, and this madness is religious in an important sense. Lacan's work provides Žižek a vantage point from which to appreciate and critique both Foucault and Derrida's reflections on madness and the Cartesian *cogito*.

From Žižek, we step back to consider Thomas Aquinas, and Tina Beattie gives us a provocative constructive re-reading of Aquinas avec Lacan, mediated by the rock group Queen's famous song "Bohemian Rhapsody." For Beattie, "Nothing Really Matters," and yet, strangely enough, everything matters for a Lacanian-inspired theology that returns to the Middle Ages. This return to Aquinas is not intended to become handmaiden to a

33. David Crownfield, "Extraduction," in Wyschogrod et al., *Lacan and Theological Discourse*, 162.

34. Ibid.

35. Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject* (London: Continuum, 2009) 132.

36. Slavoj Žižek, "Kierkegaard as a Hegelian," in Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006) 75–80.

sovereign King, but to adopt a position as the “queen” that queers or makes strange all the sciences in the name of theology. Beattie’s essay also helps open up the terrain that is engaged in Part Two.

Shifting from Aquinas to Luther, Carl Raschke’s essay, “Subjectivation, Salvation, and the Real in Luther and Lacan,” shows a strange affinity between Lacan and Luther despite the evident and much-documented Catholic elements of Lacan’s work. Raschke suggests that there is a structurally similar undecidability between law and gospel in Luther’s theology that corresponds to the undecidable tension between the symbolic and the Real in Lacan’s psychoanalysis. Raschke suggests that theological discourse concerns the speech of God, and we must understand this in psychoanalytic terms as speech of the Other that insists upon a truth which is not objective but is subjective truth, *our* truth.

Chapter 4 focuses on the Buddha; Mario D’Amato in “*Lacan avec le Bouddha*” provides an analysis of some of the overlapping concepts shared by Lacanian psychoanalysis and Buddhism, particularly the Yogacara tradition. Both traditions focus on the limits and the possibilities of language, and how language connects paradoxically (or parallactically) with the Real.

After this engagement with Buddhism we turn to atheism, in the form of Martin Hägglund’s radical atheism, which is the subject of a friendly critique by Adrian Johnston. In “Life Terminable and Interminable,” Johnston demonstrates how a Lacanian perspective complicates Hägglund’s straightforward affirmation of life as infinite temporal survival. He suggests that Hägglund confuses prescription with description, and that Hägglund prescribes the radical atheism he pretends to describe in Derrida’s work. Johnston suggests that both Derrida’s and Lacan’s thinking about ghosts opens up a perspective on the complex and fantastic nature of human desire in its unconscious effects that Hägglund neglects.

In her essay “Solidarity in Suffering with the Non-Human,” Katerina Kolozova develops a provocative understanding of Judith Butler’s thought by crossing it not only with Lacan but also the non-philosophy of François Laruelle. She suggests that Butler and Donna Haraway offer resources for a universal definition of humanity as a creature that is capable of identifying with suffering. We become human by directly identifying with the Real of the suffering body, rather than being caught up in the transcendental and symbolic mediations of language. This becoming human is also an overcoming of the essential limits of philosophical humanism and a way to embrace our solidary existence as a human animal, a non-human in the sense of Laruelle’s non-philosophy. Here both Christ and Oedipus serve as exemplary figures of the non-human. Kolozova’s rich account opens up

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Lacan to a kind of non-Lacan, and this political and ethical matrix provides resources to reconceive and reconfigure theology itself.

Part Two, “Theology and the Other Lacan,” more explicitly and intensively reworks Lacan in theological terms that deform our understanding of theology and reconfigure our understanding of Lacan. In his essay “There Is Something of One (God): Lacan and Political Theology,” Ken Reinhard rereads Lacan’s formulas of sexuation in a political theological context over against Carl Schmitt. Reinhard reads Lacan from the standpoint of Alain Badiou, and suggests that Lacan offers not only a political theology of sovereignty based on a masculine logic of exception, which accords with Schmitt’s political theology, but also a political theology of the neighbor based on a feminine logic of not-all. In the latter case, a “something of One” is the product rather than the agent of discourse. Here the “subject” of political theology is not God or the self but the neighbor.

From the idea of the One in Lacan, we turn to the question of “Woman and the Number of God.” Lorenzo Chiesa provides a magisterial interpretation of *Seminar XX*. Chiesa, perhaps the most careful contemporary reader of Lacan, distinguishes not only between a masculine and a feminine *jouissance*, but also and more importantly between two forms of a feminine *jouissance*, one that is phallic and one that is mystical or non-phallic. The non-phallic female *jouissance* subtracts from the more general phallic *jouissance*, and the status of this mystical *jouissance* has implications for how we think about God, including the number of God, which is not One but also not simply two.

In her contribution, “Secular Theology as Language of Rebellion,” Noëlle Vahanian inhabits this complex space opened up by Reinhard’s political theology of the neighbor to suggest that Lacan’s psychoanalytic desire is an intrinsically “rebellious desire to no end.” For Vahanian, a secular theology of language in the wake of the death of God as sovereign subject takes up the task of what Julia Kristeva calls rejection in *Revolution in Poetic Language*. What Kristeva calls rejection or revolt, Vahanian names rebellion, and it is this rebellion that drives secular theology in its restlessness. She expresses a rich interpassivity in which “I am active through the Other” that she finds in the jazz music of Louis Armstrong, and this is a profoundly religious experience.

In “Making the Quarter Turn,” Thomas Lynch reclaims liberation theology in light of Lacan’s work as well as Žižek’s political recuperation of it. For Lynch, a Lacanian interpretation of liberation theology produces a new form of discourse that emerges out of the split subject of the hysteric’s discourse, one of the four forms of discourse Lacan analyzes in *Seminar XVII*. What begins as a hysterical discourse then opens up to become a new analyst’s discourse by traversing the fantasy of traditional theological discourse.

For Marcus Pound, theology begins and ends with grace, and grace is an underappreciated theme of Lacan's work. Pound traces Lacan's understanding of grace in his readings of Pascal in *Seminar XIII* and *Seminar XVI*. Grace is not simply a theological problem, but the very locus of subjectivity for Lacan because it mediates the encounter with the Real. Grace refers us to a God or Other that structures our subjectivity and our experiences. Pound attends to the theological framework that underlies Lacan's thought as the very possibility of psychoanalysis.

Clayton Crockett concludes by wrestling explicitly with Lacan's proclamation of the triumph of religion, which is referenced by other contributors. He suggests that we distinguish theology in Hegelian terms into theology in itself, which is ideology, theology for itself, which is energy, and theology in and for itself, which is psychoanalysis. Crockett offers readings of how the question of God is related to the status of the Other in Lacan's work, and he analyzes the shift in Lacan's work from the Other to the other, the *objet petit a*, in *Seminar XVII*. This shift is coincident with an extraordinary transformation of global capitalism, and Crockett traces some of the political and theological implications. Altogether, these essays develop some of the most important theological results of engaging with Lacan's work, as theology struggles with the task of traversing its own fantasy to arrive, however fleetingly, at the Real.

**Part One**

**Lacan, Religion, and Others**

## ***Cogito, Madness, and Religion***

*Derrida, Foucault, and Then Lacan*

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

THE “ANTAGONISM” OF THE Kantian notion of freedom (as the most concise expression of the antagonism of freedom in the bourgeois life itself) does not reside where Adorno locates it (the autonomously self-imposed law means that freedom coincides with self-enslavement and self-domination, that the Kantian “spontaneity” is *in actu* its opposite, utter self-control, thwarting of all spontaneous impetuses), but “much more on the surface”:<sup>1</sup> for Kant as for Rousseau, the greatest moral good is to lead a fully autonomous life as a free rational agent, and the worst evil subjection to the will of another; however, Kant has to concede that man does not emerge as a free mature rational agent spontaneously, through his/her natural development, but only through the arduous process of maturation sustained by harsh discipline and education which cannot but be experienced by the subject as imposed on his/her freedom, as an external coercion:

Social institutions both to nourish and to develop such independence are necessary and are consistent with, do not thwart, its realization, but with freedom understood as an individual’s causal agency this will always look like an external necessity that we have good reasons to try to avoid. This creates the problem of a form of dependence that can be considered constitutive of

1. Robert Pippin, *The Persistence of Subjectivity: On the Kantian Aftermath* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 118.

independence and that cannot be understood as a mere compromise with the particular will of another or as a separate, marginal topic of Kant's dotage. This is, in effect, the antinomy contained within the bourgeois notions of individuality, individual responsibility . . .<sup>2</sup>

One can effectively imagine here Kant as an unexpected precursor on Foucault's thesis, from his *Discipline and Punish*, of the formation of the free individual through a complex set of disciplinary micro-practices—and, as Pippin doesn't wait to point out, this antinomy explodes even larger in Kant's socio-historical reflections, focused on the notion of "unsocial sociability": what is Kant's notion of the historical relation between democracy and monarchy if not this same thesis on the link between freedom and submission to educative dependence applied to historical process itself? In the long term (or in its notion), democracy is the only appropriate form of government; however, because of the immaturity of people, conditions for a functioning democracy can only be established through a non-democratic monarchy which, through the exertion of its benevolent power, educates people to political maturity. And, as expected, Kant does not fail to mention the Mandevillian rationality of the market in which each individual's pursuit of his/her egotistic interests is what works best (much better than direct altruistic work) for the common good. At its most extreme, this brings Kant to the notion that human history itself is a deployment of an inscrutable divine plan, within which we, mortals, are destined to play a role unbeknownst to us—here, the paradox grows even stronger: not only is our freedom linked to its opposite "from below," but also "from above," i.e., not only can our freedom arise only through our submission and dependence, but our freedom as such is a moment of a larger divine plan—our freedom is not truly an aim-in-itself, it serves a higher purpose.

A way to clarify—if not resolve—this dilemma would have been to introduce some further crucial distinctions into the notion of "noumenal" freedom itself. That is to say, upon a closer look, it becomes evident that, for Kant, discipline and education do not directly work on our animal nature, forging it into human individuality: as Kant points out, animals cannot be properly educated since their behavior is already predestined by their instincts. What this means is that, paradoxically, in order to be educated into freedom (qua moral autonomy and self-responsibility), I already have to be free in a much more radical, "noumenal" sense, monstrous even.

Daniel Dennett draws a convincing and insightful parallel between an animal's physical environs and human environs; not only human artefacts

2. Ibid., 118–19.

(clothes, houses, tools), but also the “virtual” environs of the discursive cobweb: “Stripped of [the ‘web of discourses’], an individual human being is as incomplete as a bird without feathers, a turtle without its shell.”<sup>3</sup> A naked man is the same nonsense as a shaved ape: without language (and tools and . . .), man is a crippled animal—it is this lack which is supplemented by symbolic institutions and tools, so that the point made obvious today, in popular culture figures like Robocop (man is simultaneously super-animal and crippled), holds from the very beginning. How do we pass from “natural” to “symbolic” environs? This passage is not direct, one cannot account for it within a continuous evolutionary narrative: something has to intervene between the two, a kind of “vanishing mediator,” which is neither Nature nor Culture—this In-between is not the spark of logos magically conferred on homo sapiens, enabling him to form his supplementary virtual symbolic environs, but precisely something which, although it is also no longer nature, is not yet logos, and has to be “repressed” by logos—the Freudian name for this monstrous freedom, of course, is death drive. It is interesting to note how philosophical narratives of the “birth of man” are always compelled to presuppose a moment in human (pre)history when (what will become) man, is no longer a mere animal and simultaneously not yet a “being of language,” bound by symbolic Law; a moment of thoroughly “perverted,” “denaturalized,” “derailed” nature which is not yet culture. In his anthropological writings, Kant emphasized that the human animal needs disciplinary pressure in order to tame an uncanny “unruliness” which seems to be inherent to human nature—a wild, unconstrained propensity to insist stubbornly on one’s own will, cost what it may. It is on account of this “unruliness” that the human animal needs a Master to discipline him: discipline targets this “unruliness,” not the animal nature in man.

In Hegel’s *Lectures on Philosophy of History*, a similar role is played by the reference to “negroes”: significantly, Hegel deals with “negroes” before history proper (which starts with ancient China), in the section titled “The Natural Context or the Geographical Basis of World History”: “negroes” stand there for the human spirit in its “state of nature,” they are described as a kind of perverted, monstrous child, simultaneously naive and extremely corrupted, i.e., living in the pre-lapsarian state of innocence, and, precisely as such, the most cruel barbarians; part of nature and yet thoroughly denaturalized; ruthlessly manipulating nature through primitive sorcery, yet simultaneously terrified by the raging natural forces; mindlessly brave cowards . . .<sup>4</sup> This In-between is the “repressed” of the narrative form (in this

3. Daniel C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (New York: Little, Brown, 1991) 416.

4. G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History, Introduction: Reason in History*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975) 176–90.



case, of Hegel's "large narrative" of world-historical succession of spiritual forms): not nature as such, but the very break with nature which is (later) supplemented by the virtual universe of narratives. According to Schelling, prior to its assertion as the medium of the rational Word, the subject is the "infinite lack of being" (*unendliche Mangel an Sein*), the violent gesture of contraction that negates every being outside itself. This insight also forms the core of Hegel's notion of madness: when Hegel determines madness to be a withdrawal from the actual world, the closing of the soul into itself, its "contraction," the cutting-off of its links with external reality, he all too quickly conceives of this withdrawal as a "regression" to the level of the "animal soul" still embedded in its natural environs and determined by the rhythm of nature (night and day, etc.). Does this withdrawal, on the contrary, not designate the severing of the links with the *Umwelt*, the end of the subject's immersion into its immediate natural environs, and is it, as such, not the founding gesture of "humanization"? Was this withdrawal-into-self not accomplished by Descartes in his universal doubt and reduction to *Cogito*, which, as Derrida pointed out in his "*Cogito and the History of Madness*,"<sup>5</sup> also involves a passage through the moment of radical madness?

This brings us to the necessity of Fall: what the Kantian link between dependence and autonomy amounts to is that Fall is unavoidable, a necessary step in the moral progress of man. That is to say, in precise Kantian terms: "Fall" is the very renunciation of my radical ethical autonomy; it occurs when I take refuge in a heteronomous Law, in a Law which is experience as imposed on me from the outside, i.e., the finitude in which I search for a support to avoid the dizziness of freedom is the finitude of the external-heteronomous Law itself. Therein resides the difficulty of being a Kantian. Every parent knows that the child's provocations, wild and "transgressive" as they may appear, ultimately conceal and express a demand, addressed at the figure of authority, to set a firm limit, to draw a line which means "This far and no further!"; thus enabling the child to achieve a clear mapping of what is possible and what is not possible. (And does the same not go also for the hysteric's provocations?) This, precisely, is what the analyst refuses to do, and this is what makes him so traumatic—paradoxically, it is the setting of a firm limit which is liberating, and it is the very absence of a firm limit which is experienced as suffocating. *This* is why the Kantian autonomy of the subject is so difficult—its implication is precisely that there is nobody outside, no external agent of "natural authority," who can do the job for me and set me my limit, that I myself have to pose a limit to my natural "unruliness."

5. Jacques Derrida, "*Cogito and the History of Madness*," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) 31–63.

Although Kant famously wrote that man is an animal which needs a master, this should not deceive us: what Kant aims at is not the philosophical commonplace according to which, in contrast to animals whose behavioral patterns are grounded in their inherited instincts, man lacks such firm coordinates which, therefore, have to be imposed on him from the outside, through a cultural authority; Kant's true aim is rather to point out how the very need of an external master is a deceptive lure: man needs a master in order to conceal from himself the deadlock of his own difficult freedom and self-responsibility. In this precise sense, a truly enlightened "mature" human being is a subject who no longer needs a master, who can fully assume the heavy burden of defining his own limitations. This basic Kantian (and also Hegelian) lesson was put very clearly by Chesterton: "Every act of will is an act of self-limitation. To desire action is to desire limitation. In that sense every act is an act of self-sacrifice."<sup>6</sup>

The lesson here is thus Hegelian in a very precise sense: the external opposition between freedom (transcendental spontaneity, moral autonomy and self-responsibility) and slavery (submission, either to my own nature, its "pathological" instincts, or to external power) has to be transposed into freedom itself, as the "highest" antagonism between the monstrous freedom qua "unruliness" and the true moral freedom. However, a possible counter-argument here would have been that this noumenal excess of freedom (the Kantian "unruliness," the Hegelian "Night of the World") is a retroactive result of the disciplinary mechanisms themselves (along the lines of the Paulinian motif of "Law creates transgression," or of the Foucauldian topic of how the very disciplinary measures that try to regulate sexuality generate "sex" as the elusive excess)—the obstacle creates that which it endeavors to control. Are we then dealing with a closed circle of a process positing one's own presuppositions?

### Madness and (in) the History of *Cogito*

This paraphrase of the title of Derrida's essay on Foucault's *Histoire de la folie* has a precise stake: madness is inscribed into the history of *Cogito* at two levels. First, throughout entire philosophy of subjectivity from Descartes through Kant, Schelling and Hegel, to Nietzsche and Husserl, *Cogito* is related to its shadowy double, *pharmakon*, which is madness. Second, madness is inscribed into the very (pre)history of *Cogito* itself; it is part of its transcendental genesis.

6. G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: John Lane, 1909) 70.

In “*Cogito and the History of Madness*” (*Writing and Difference*), Derrida states that

the *Cogito* escapes madness only because at its own moment, under its own authority, it is valid *even if I am mad*, even if my thoughts are completely mad. . . . Descartes never interns madness, neither at the stage of natural doubt nor at the stage of metaphysical doubt.

. . . Whether I am mad or not, *Cogito, sum*. . . [E]ven if the totality of the world does not exist, even if nonmeaning has invaded the totality of the world, up to and including the very contents of my thought, I still think, I am while I think.<sup>7</sup>

Derrida leaves no doubt that “as soon as Descartes has reached this extremity, he seeks to reassure himself, to certify the *Cogito* through God, to identify the act of the *Cogito* with a reasonable reason.”<sup>8</sup> This withdrawal sets in “from the moment when he pulls himself out of madness by determining natural light through a series of principles and axioms.”<sup>9</sup> The term “light” is here crucial to measure the distance of Descartes from German Idealism, in which, precisely, the core of the subject is no longer light, but the abyss of darkness, the “Night of the World.”

This, then, is Derrida’s fundamental interpretive gesture: the one of “separating, within the *Cogito*, on the one hand, hyperbole (which I maintain cannot be enclosed in a factual and determined historical structure, for it is the project of exceeding every finite and determined totality), and, on the other hand, that in Descartes’s philosophy (or in the philosophy supporting the Augustinian *Cogito* or the Husserlian *Cogito* as well) which belongs to a factual historical structure.”<sup>10</sup>

Here, when Derrida asserts that “the historicity proper to philosophy is located and constituted in the transition, the dialogue between hyperbole and the finite structure, . . . in the difference between history and historicity,”<sup>11</sup> he is perhaps too short. This tension may appear very “Lacanian”: is it not a version of the tension between the Real—the hyperbolic excess—and its (ultimately always failed) symbolization? The matrix we thus arrive at is the one of the eternal oscillation between the two extremes, the radical expenditure, hyperbole, excess, and its later domestication (like Kristeva, between Semiotic and Symbolic . . .). Both extremes are il-

7. Ibid., 55–56.

8. Ibid., 58.

9. Ibid., 59.

10. Ibid., 60.

11. Ibid.

lusionary: pure excess as well as pure finite order would disintegrate, cancel themselves. . . . This misses the true point of “madness,” which is not the pure excess of the Night of the World, but the madness of the passage to the Symbolic itself, of imposing a symbolic order onto the chaos of the Real. (Like Freud, who, in his Schreber analysis, points out how the paranoiac “system” is not madness, but a desperate attempt to *escape* madness—the disintegration of the symbolic universe—through an ersatz, as if, universe of meaning.) If madness is constitutive, then *every* system of meaning is minimally paranoiac, “mad.”

Recall Brecht’s “what is the robbing of a bank compared to the founding of a new bank?”—therein resides the lesson of David Lynch’s *Straight Story*: what is the ridiculously pathetic perversity of figures like Bobby Perou in *Wild at Heart* or Frank in *Blue Velvet* compared to deciding to traverse the U.S. central plane in a tractor to visit a dying relative? Measured with this act, Frank’s and Bobby’s outbreaks of rage are the impotent theatrics of old and sedate conservatives.

This step is the properly “Hegelian” one—Hegel, who is the philosopher who made the most radical attempt to *think together* the abyss of madness at the core of subjectivity *and* the totality of the System of meaning. This is why, for very good reasons, “Hegel” stands for the common sense for the moment at which philosophy gets “mad,” explodes into a “crazy” pretense at “absolute knowledge.”

So: not simply “madness” and symbolization—there is, in the very history of philosophy (of philosophical “systems”), a *privileged* point at which the hyperbole, philosophy’s ex-timate core, directly inscribes itself into it, and this is the moment of *Cogito*, of transcendental philosophy. “Madness” is here “tamed” in a different way, through a “transcendental” horizon, which does not cancel it in an all-encompassing world view, but maintains it.

In the serene world of mental illness, modern man no longer communicates with the madman: . . . the man of reason delegates the physician to madness, thereby authorizing a relation only through the abstract universality of disease.<sup>12</sup>

However, what about psychoanalysis? Is psychoanalysis not precisely the point at which the “man of reason” reestablishes his dialogue with madness, rediscovering the dimension of truth in it? And this is not the same (“hermeneutic”-mantic) truth as before, in the pre-modern universe. Foucault deals with this in his *History of Sexuality*, where psychoanalysis as the culmination of “sex as the ultimate truth” has a confessional logic.

12. Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization* (London: Tavistock, 1967) x.

In spite of the finesse of Foucault's reply, he ultimately falls prey to the trap of historicism which cannot account for its own position of enunciation; this impossibility is redoubled in Foucault's characterization of his "object," madness, which oscillates between two extremes. On the one hand, his strategic aim is to make madness itself talk, as it is in itself, outside the (scientific, etc.) discourse on it: "it is definitely not a question of a history of ideas, but of the rudimentary movements of an experience. A history not of psychiatry, but of madness itself, in its vivacity, before knowledge has even begun to close in on it."<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, the (later) model deployed in his *Discipline and Punish* and *History of Sexuality* compels him to posit the absolute immanence of the (excessive, transgressive, resisting) object to its manipulation by the dispositif of power-knowledge: in the same way that "the carceral network does not cast the unassimilable into a confused hell; there is no outside";<sup>14</sup> in the same way that the "liberated" man is itself generated by the dispositif that controls and regulates him; in the same way that "sex" as the unassimilable excess is itself generated by the discourses and practices that try to control and regulate it; madness is also generated by the very discourse that excludes, objectivizes and studies it, there is no "pure" madness outside it—Foucault here "effectively acknowledges the correctness of Derrida's formulation,"<sup>15</sup> namely, of *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*, providing his own version of it.

Foucault writes, "Perhaps one day [transgression] will seem as decisive for our culture, as much part of its soil, as the experience of contradiction was at an earlier time for dialectical thought."<sup>16</sup> Does he not thereby miss the point, which is that this day has already arrived, that permanent transgression already *is* the feature of late capitalism? His final reproach to Derrida's *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*:<sup>17</sup> textual analysis, philosophical hermeneutics, no exteriority:

Reduction of discursive practices to textual traces; elision of the events which are produced in these practices, so that all that

13. Michel Foucault, *Folie et déraison: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Paris: Plon, 1961) vii.

14. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977) 301.

15. Robert Boyne, *Foucault and Derrida: The Other Side of Reason* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990) 118.

16. Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977) 33.

17. "Reading . . . cannot legitimately transgress the text toward something other than it. . . . There is nothing outside the text." Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976) 158.

remains of them are marks for a reading; inventions of voices behind the texts, so that we do not have to analyze the modes of the implication of the subject in the discourses; the assignation of the originary as [what is] said and not-said in the text, so that we do not have to locate discursive practices in the field of transformations in which they effectuate themselves.<sup>18</sup>

Some Marxists even presume this, as if Foucault/Derrida = materialism/idealism. Textual endless self-reflexive games versus materialist analysis. *But*: Foucault: remains *historicist*. He reproaches Derrida his inability to think the exteriority of philosophy—this is how he designates the stakes of their debate:

Could there be something prior or external to the philosophical discourse? Can the condition of this discourse be an exclusion, a refusal, an avoided risk, and, why not, a fear? A suspicion rejected passionately by Derrida. *Pudenda origo*, said Nietzsche with regard to religious people and their religion.<sup>19</sup>

However, Derrida is much closer to thinking this externality than Foucault, for whom exteriority involves simple historicist reduction which cannot account for itself (to which Foucault used to reply with a cheap rhetorical trick that this is a “police” question, “who are you to say that”—*again*, combining it with the opposite, that genealogical history is “ontology of the present”). It is easy to do *this* to philosophy, it is much more difficult to think its *inherent* excess, its ex-timacy (and philosophers can easily dismiss such external reduction as confusing genesis and value). These, then, are the true stakes of the debate: ex-timacy or direct externality.

### Foucault versus Derrida, or Foucault on Descartes

*Cogito*, madness and religion are interlinked in Descartes (*génie malin*), in Kant (despite his distance from Swedenborg, who stands for madness, etc.). Simultaneously, *Cogito* emerges through differentiation from (reference to) madness, *and Cogito* itself (the idea of *Cogito* as the point of absolute certainty, “subjective idealism”) is perceived by common sense as the very epitome of the madness of philosophy, crazy paranoiac system-building (philosopher as madman—[not only] late Wittgenstein). And, also simultaneously,

18. Michel Foucault, “Mon corps, ce papier, ce feu,” in *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972) 602.

19. *Ibid.*, 584.

religion (direct faith) is evoked as madness (Swedenborg for Kant, or radical Enlightenment rationalists, up to Dawkins), *and* religion (God) enters as the solution from (solipsistic) madness (Descartes).

Foucault and Derrida's polemic is one in which they share the key underlying premise: that *Cogito* is inherently related to madness. The difference is that for Foucault, *Cogito* is grounded in the exclusion of madness, while, for Derrida, *Cogito* itself can only emerge through a "mad" hyperbole (universalized doubt), and remains marked by this excess. Before it stabilizes itself as *res cogitans*, the self-transparent thinking substance, *Cogito* as a crazy punctual excess.

In Foucault there is a fundamental change in the status of madness that took place in the passage from Renaissance to the classical Age of Reason (the beginning of seventeenth century). In the Renaissance (Cervantes, Shakespeare, Erasmus, etc.), madness was a specific phenomenon of human spirit which belonged to the series of prophets, possessed visionaries, those obsessed by demons, saints, comedians, etc. It was a meaningful phenomenon with a truth of its own. Even if madmen were vilified, they were treated with awe, like messengers of sacred horror. With Descartes, however, madness is excluded: madness, in all its varieties, comes to occupy a position that was the former location of leprosy. It is no longer a phenomenon to be interpreted, searched for its meaning, but a simple illness to be treated under the well-regulated laws of a medicine or a science that is already sure of itself, sure that it cannot be mad. This change does not concern only theory, but social practice itself: from the Classical Age, madmen were interned, imprisoned in psychiatric hospitals, deprived of the full dignity of a human being, studied and controlled like a natural phenomenon.

In his *Histoire de la folie*, Foucault dedicates three to four pages to the passage in *meditations* in which Descartes arrives at *Cogito, ergo sum*. Searching for the absolutely certain foundation of knowledge, Descartes analyses the main forms of delusions: delusions of senses and sensible perception, illusions of madness, dreams. He ends with the most radical delusion imaginable, the hypothesis that all that we see is not true, but a universal dream, and illusion staged by an evil God (*Malin Génie*). From here, he arrives at the certainty of *Cogito* (I think): even if I can doubt everything, even if all I see is an illusion, I cannot doubt that I think all this, so *Cogito* is the absolutely certain starting point of philosophy. Foucault's reproach is that Descartes does not really confront madness, but avoids thinking it. *He excludes madness* from the domain of reason: "Dreams or illusions are surmounted within the structure of truth; but madness is inadmissible for the doubting subject." In the Classical Age, Reason is thus based on the exclusion of madness: the very existence of the category "madness" is historically determined, along with its opposite

“reason”; that is, it is determined, through power relations. Madness in the modern sense is not directly a phenomenon that we can observe, but a discursive construct which emerges at a certain historical moment, together with its double, Reason, in the modern sense.

In his reading of *Histoire de la folie*, Derrida focuses on these four pages about Descartes which, for him, provide the key to the entire book. Through a detailed analysis, he tries to demonstrate that Descartes does not *exclude* madness, but brings it to *extreme*: the universal doubt, where I suspect that the entire world is an illusion, is the strongest madness imaginable. Out of this universal doubt, *Cogito* emerges: even if everything is an illusion, I can still be sure that I think. Madness is thus not excluded by *Cogito*: it is not that the *Cogito* is not mad, but *Cogito* is true even if I am totally mad. The extreme doubt, the hypothesis of universal madness, is not external to philosophy, but strictly internal to it. It is the hyperbolic moment, the moment of madness, which *grounds* philosophy. Of course, Descartes later “domesticates” this radical excess: he presents the image of man as thinking substance, dominated by reason; he constructs a philosophy which is clearly historically conditioned. But the excess, the hyperbole of universal madness, is not historical. It is the excessive moment which grounds philosophy, in all its historical forms. Madness is thus not excluded by philosophy: it is internal to it. Of course, every philosophy tries to control this excess, to repress it—but in repressing it, it represses its own innermost foundation: “Philosophy is perhaps the reassurance given against the anguish of being mad at the point of greatest proximity to madness.”<sup>20</sup>

In his reply, Foucault first tries to prove, through a detailed reading of Descartes, that the madness evoked by Descartes does not have the same status of illusion as sensory illusions and dreams. When I suffer sensory illusions of perception or when I dream, I still *remain normal and rational*, I only deceive myself with regard to what I see. In madness, on the contrary, I myself am no longer normal, I lose my reason. So madness has to be excluded if I am to be a rational subject. Derrida’s refusal to exclude madness from philosophy bears witness to the fact that he remains a philosopher who is unable to think the Outside of philosophy, who is unable to think how philosophy itself is determined by something that escapes it. Apropos the hypothesis of universal doubt and the Evil Genius, we are not dealing with true madness here, but with the rational subject who feigns to be mad, who makes a rational experiment, never losing his control over it.

Finally, in the very last page of his reply, Foucault tries to determine the true difference between himself and Derrida. He attacks here (without

20. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 59.



naming it) the practice of deconstruction and textual analysis, for which “there is nothing outside the text” and we are caught in the endless process of interpretation. Foucault, on the contrary, does not practice textual analysis, but analyses of *discourses*. He analyses “dispositifs,” formations in which texts and statements are interlinked with extra-textual mechanisms of power and control. What we have to look for are not deeper textual analyses, but the way discursive practices are combined with practices of power and domination.

### . . . and Then Lacan

The philosopher who stands for one of the extremes of “madness” is Nicholas Malebranche, his “occasionalism.” Malebranche, a disciple of Descartes, drops Descartes’s ridiculous reference to the pineal gland in order to explain the coordination between the material and the spiritual substance, i.e. body and soul; how, then, are we to explain their coordination, if there is no contact between the two, no point at which a soul can act causally on a body or vice versa? Since the two causal networks (that of ideas in my mind and that of bodily interconnections) are totally independent, the only solution is that a third, true Substance (God) continuously coordinates and mediates between the two, sustaining the semblance of continuity: when I think about raising my hand and my hand effectively raises, my thought causes the raising of my hand not directly but only “occasionally”—upon noticing my thought directed at raising my hand, God sets in motion the other, material, causal chain which leads to my hand effectively being raised. If we replace “God” with the big Other, the symbolic order, we can see the closeness of occasionalism to Lacan’s position: as Lacan put it in his polemics against Aristotle in “Television,”<sup>21</sup> the relationship between soul and body is never direct, since the big Other always interposes itself between the two. Occasionalism is thus essentially a name for the “arbitrary of the signifier,” for the gap that separates the network of ideas from the network of bodily (real) causality, for the fact that it is the big Other which accounts for the coordination of the two networks, so that, when my body bites an apple, my soul experiences a pleasurable sensation. This same gap is targeted by the ancient Aztec priest who organizes human sacrifices to ensure that the sun will rise again: the human sacrifice is here an appeal to God to sustain the coordination between the two series, the bodily necessity and the concatenation of symbolic events. “Irrational” as the Aztec priest’s sacrificing may appear, its underlying premise is far more insightful than our commonplace

21. Jacques Lacan, “Television,” *October* 40 (1987) 7–50.

intuition according to which the coordination between body and soul is direct, i.e., it is “natural” for me to have a pleasurable sensation when I bite an apple since this sensation is caused directly by the apple: what gets lost is the intermediary role of the big Other in guaranteeing the coordination between reality and our mental experience of it. And is it not the same with our immersion into Virtual Reality? When I raise my hand in order to push an object in the virtual space, this object effectively moves—my illusion, of course, is that it was the movement of my hand which directly caused the dislocation of the object, i.e., in my immersion, I overlook the intricate mechanism of computerized coordination, homologous to the role of God guaranteeing the coordination between the two series in occasionalism.<sup>22</sup>

It is a well-known fact that the “Close the door” button in most elevators is a totally disfunctional placebo, which is placed there just to give the individuals the impression that they are somehow participating, contributing to the speed of the elevator journey—when we push this button, the door closes in exactly the same time as when we just pressed the floor button without “speeding up” the process by pressing also the “Close the door” button. This extreme and clear case of fake participation is an appropriate metaphor of the participation of individuals in our “postmodern” political process. And this is occasionalism at its purest: according to Malebranche, we are all the time pressing such buttons, and it is God’s incessant activity that coordinates between them and the event that follows (the door closing), while we think the event results from our pushing the button.

For that reason, it is crucial to keep open the radical ambiguity of how cyberspace will affect our lives: this does not depend on technology as such but on the mode of its social inscription. Immersion into cyberspace can intensify our bodily experience (new sensuality, new body with more organs, new sexes), but it also opens up the possibility for the one who manipulates the machinery which runs the cyberspace literally to steal our own (virtual) body, depriving us of the control over it, so that one no longer relates to one’s body as to “one’s own.” What one encounters here is the constitutive ambiguity of the notion of mediatization:<sup>23</sup> originally this notion designated the gesture by means of which a subject was stripped of its direct, immediate right to make decisions; the great master of political mediatization was Napoleon, who left to the conquered monarchs the appearance of power, while they were effectively no longer in a position to exercise it. At a more general level, one could say that such a “mediatization” of the monarch

22. The main work of Nicolas Malebranche is *Recherches de la vérité* (1674–75), the most available edition Paris: Vrin, 1975.

23. As to this ambiguity, see Paul Virilio, *The Art of the Motor*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

defines the constitutional monarchy: in it, the monarch is reduced to the point of a purely formal symbolic gesture of “dotting the i’s,” of signing and thus conferring the performative force on the edicts whose content is determined by the elected governing body. And does not, *mutatis mutandis*, the same not hold also for today’s progressive computerization of our everyday lives in the course of which the subject is also more and more “mediatized,” imperceptibly stripped of his power, under the false guise of its increase? When our body is mediatized (caught in the network of electronic media), it is simultaneously exposed to the threat of a radical “proletarianization”: the subject is potentially reduced to the pure  $\$$  (the divided subject), since even my own personal experience can be stolen, manipulated, regulated by the machinical Other.

One can see, again, how the prospect of radical virtualization bestows on the computer the position which is strictly homologous to that of God in the Malebrancheian occasionalism: since the computer coordinates the relationship between my mind and (what I experience as) the movement of my limbs (in the virtual reality), one can easily imagine a computer which runs amok and starts to act like an Evil God, disturbing the coordination between my mind and my bodily self-experience—when the signal of my mind to raise my hand is suspended or even counteracted in (the virtual) reality, the most fundamental experience of the body as “mine” is undermined . . . It seems thus that cyberspace effectively realizes the paranoid fantasy elaborated by Schreber, the German judge whose memoirs were analyzed by Freud: the “wired universe” is psychotic insofar as it seems to materialize Schreber’s hallucination of the divine rays through which God directly controls the human mind. In other words, does the externalization of the big Other in the computer not account for the inherent paranoid dimension of the wired universe? Or, to put it in a yet another way: the commonplace is that, in cyberspace, the ability to download consciousness into a computer finally frees people from their bodies—but it also frees the machines from “their” people . . . This brings us the Wachowski brothers’ *Matrix* trilogy: much more than Berkeley’s God who sustains the world in his mind, the *ultimate* Matrix is Malebranche’s occasionalist God.

What, then, is the Matrix? Simply the Lacanian “big Other,” the virtual symbolic order, the network that structures reality for us. This dimension of the “big Other” is that of the constitutive alienation of the subject in the symbolic order: the big Other pulls the strings, the subject doesn’t speak, he “is spoken” by the symbolic structure. In short, this “big Other” is the name for the social Substance, for all that on account of which the subject never fully dominates the effects of his acts, i.e., on account of which the final outcome of his activity is always something else with regard to what

he aimed at or anticipated. However, it is here crucial to note that, in the key chapters of *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, Lacan struggles to delineate the operation that follows alienation and is in a sense its counterpoint, that of separation: alienation IN the big Other is followed by the separation *from* the big Other. Separation takes place when the subject takes note of how the big Other is in itself inconsistent, purely virtual, “barred,” deprived of the Thing—and fantasy is an attempt to fill out this lack of the Other, not of the subject, i.e., to (re)constitute the consistency of the big Other. For that reason, fantasy and paranoia are inherently linked: paranoia is at its most elementary a belief in an “Other of the Other,” into another Other who, hidden behind the Other of the explicit social texture, programs (what appears to us as) the unforeseen effects of social life and thus guarantees its consistency: beneath the chaos of market, the degradation of morals, etc., there is the purposeful strategy of the Jewish plot. This paranoid stance acquired a further boost with today’s digitalization of our daily lives: when our entire (social) existence is progressively externalized-materialized in the big Other of the computer network, it is easy to imagine an evil programmer erasing our digital identity and thus depriving us of our social existence, turning us into non-persons.

Following the same paranoid twist, the thesis of *The Matrix* is that this big Other is externalized in the really existing Mega-Computer. There is—there *has* to be—a Matrix because “things are not right, opportunities are missed, something goes wrong all the time,” i.e., the film’s idea is that it is so because there is the Matrix that obfuscates the “true” reality that is behind it all. Consequently, the problem with the film is that it is *not* “crazy” enough, because it supposes another “real” reality behind our everyday reality sustained by the Matrix. One is tempted to claim, in the Kantian mode, that the mistake of the conspiracy theory is somehow homologous to the “paralogism of the pure reason,” to the confusion between the two levels: the suspicion (of the received scientific, social, etc. common sense) as the formal methodological stance, and the positivation of this suspicion in another all-explaining global para-theory.