

# Psychoanalysis, Religion, Love<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract:

Lacan's provocative claims concerning what he called 'the God hypothesis' have led some of his followers into assuming he was a believer. In this article, I am at showing how throughout his oeuvre, Lacan has persistently attempted to dispel this misunderstanding concerning the relation between psychoanalysis and religion. 'God' rather provisionally stands as a profane yet unsurpassable hypothesis about the structural oscillation of the symbolic order of language between its making One and its being not-One. It is thus precisely to the extent that religion will continue to triumph in the future that the legacy of Freud's teaching will have failed. More specifically, Lacan locates the harshest of battles between religion and psychoanalysis in the field of love. Against the redemptive value of Christian love, and its dangerous disavowal of the real, Lacan advances a psychoanalytic theory of sexuation that closely associates love as a 'desire to be One' with exorcising God. This also poses an open question about true love: can love sometimes be truthful in spite of the ultimate meaninglessness that it logically presupposes and seems to confine it to the realm of a palliative but also potentially lethal narcissistic illusion?

**Keywords:** Lacan, God, Christianity, other, religion

In Seminar XX (1972-1973), Lacan puts forward what he calls 'the God hypothesis', namely, 'As long as somebody will say something, the God hypothesis will persist', or also, from a slightly different perspective, 'It is impossible to say anything without immediately making Him subsist in the form of the Other'.<sup>1</sup> At a crucial point, he acknowledges with frustration that these statements might easily lead those who follow him into assuming he is a believer: 'Naturally, you are all going to be convinced that I believe in God!'.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout his oeuvre, Lacan has persistently attempted, with the utmost urgency, to dispel this misunderstanding concerning the relation between psychoanalysis and religion. In a few words, the necessity of the *logical* existence of the *God hypothesis* for each and every speaking animal does not inevitably entail the belief in an *ontological*

1 Lacan 1998c, p. 45 (translation modified).

2 Ibid., pp. 76-77.

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divine essence; quite the contrary, it drastically puts into question this essence. On the one hand, psychoanalytical discourse must oppose with determination any precipitate materialist philosophy that feels obliged 'to be on its guard against [...] God', and reacts with uneasiness whenever he is mentioned.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, it is precisely to the extent that religion will continue to triumph in the future that the legacy of Freud's teaching will have failed.<sup>4</sup> Speaking of the Other with a capital O, putting forward the God hypothesis, that is, intentionally making *explicit* the implicit evocation of God that is already inherent to speech as such, does not in the least amount to readmitting him in disguise through the back door – by 'laicizing' him via a form of secularization that in the end remains religious. It rather amounts to 'exorcising the good old God',<sup>5</sup> Lacan says, summoning him with words in order to establish *whether* he can be chased away from the body, as a body of language, of the *homo sapiens* species.

We should thus understand in this context Lacan's repeated provocation according to which it is *theology* that, sooner or later, paves the way for a facile pseudo-atheism, where God still reigns undisturbed. For this very reason, his own redoubling of theology into a discourse on the condition of possibility of a discourse on God – 'As long as somebody will say something, the God hypothesis will persist' – will certainly displease theologians who aim at secularizing the divine. Lacan presents himself as an irreligious *para*-theologian who denounces, in different ways, both theologians and alleged materialists as *religious atheists*. The former have mostly spoken about God only in an attempt to make him compatible with the supposed immanent order of this world (from ancient theories of providence to recent ideas about an 'intelligent design'). Conversely, the latter, in deciding not to speak about him – or in claiming to liquidate him axiomatically – leave unchallenged even the most blatant transcendent mirages structurally implied by his unavoidable presence in language as the semblance of a meta-language.

As Lacan spells out very clearly in 'Le triomphe de la religion' (1974), an interview he gave fifteen months after the conclusion of Seminar XX, which should be read alongside it, religion has primarily

3 Ibid., p. 68.

4 See Lacan 2005, p. 78.

5 Lacan 1998c, p. 68.

to do with meaning [*sens*]. Religion gives meaning to the real to be understood as a logical impasse, as 'that which does not work' in the symbolic.<sup>6</sup> A religious man, a believer, is the one who believes, first and foremost, in the rational meaning of the world, in the world as 'that which works'.<sup>7</sup> Modern science increasingly expands the real, while at the same time trying in vain to foreclose it by feigning to totalize knowledge. Because of this, historically, religion 'will have even more good reason to appease hearts'.<sup>8</sup> In other words, in spite of appearing to be bound up with atheism, far from secularising the world, the advent of modernity will certainly entail in the future a *new* triumph of religion – this is a future which, as we all know, has become increasingly palpable over the last forty years. From this perspective, psychoanalysis is itself a historical product of science, a symptomatic discontent of scientific civilization, which has been able to circumscribe theoretically through its clinical practice the real nonsense which science fails to confront epistemologically – for instance, as it emerges in the paresthesias of the hysteric, the compulsive actions of the obsessional neurotic, and the voices of the psychotic. As long as the truth of this discovery is not closed off in a self-sufficient knowledge, as long as psychoanalysis is able to reinvent itself as a 'knowledge of truth' [*savoir sur la vérité*] which refuses any 'truth of knowledge' [*vérité sur le savoir*],<sup>9</sup> it will also resist, or at least slow down, the 'tireless' advance of religion, whose power we should never underestimate.<sup>10</sup>

Lacan delineates here a picture that is undoubtedly pessimistic,

6 Lacan 2005, p. 76.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., p. 79.

9 Lacan 2011, p. 195. The lesson in question comes from *Le savoir du psychanalyste*, not ... *ou pire*. In 1971-1972, Lacan ran in parallel two different Seminars at distinct locations. Jacques-Alain Miller, the editor of the Seminars, has incomprehensibly included some of the lessons of *Le savoir* in ... *ou pire*, while the others have been collected in 'Je parle aux murs' (Paris: Seuil, 2011). The former are identifiable by the subtitle 'talk' [*entretien*]. I will provide the page references of these published volumes but preserve the distinction between the two Seminars in the main text by calling them, respectively, Seminar XIX and Seminar XIX B. It is also worth noting that the date of lesson XIII of ...*ou pire* reads incorrectly 10/5/1972: it should be 17/5/1972.

10 Lacan 2005, p. 79. I thus fully share Badiou's view that 'Freud enlisted the century in a great battle about sex, meaning, and truth, a battle that Lacan depicted as a great confrontation between religion and psychoanalysis. What is at stake in this conflict is the question of knowing whether sex has a meaning [...] or whether the subjective destiny of sexuation submits the subject to a senseless truth, the truth that, in Lacan's words [...], there is no sexual relation' Badiou 2007, p. 79.

yet not hopeless.<sup>11</sup> First of all, as a worst case scenario, he does not rule out the possibility that psychoanalysis could become (or has already become), against his will, a form of meaningful religion. Should this not happen, scientific civilization, here aligned with religion, will nonetheless most likely dispose of psychoanalysis very soon, repress its symptomatic value.<sup>12</sup> In brief, psychoanalysis will certainly never triumph. But it can survive for a long time and, we may add, venturing outside the limits imposed by Lacan's scepticism on this topic, be supplanted at some stage by another discourse – yet to be invented – that will perpetuate its truth-function, its being, as he has it, a 'flash' of the real 'between two worlds' (that is, between two phases of religion as a provider of meaning), which thus shows that 'there is no world', no universe.<sup>13</sup>

What interests me the most in such an assessment of our epochal predicament is that throughout his many lectures and seminar lessons on Christianity, Lacan invariably locates the harshest of battles between religion and psychoanalysis in the field of *love*. It seems that this is where Freudianism can defend itself more vigorously, and maybe counter-attack. Lacan's belligerent strategy already transpires in the 1960 'Discours aux catholiques' and continues in his later oeuvre: we must categorically not abandon, he says, the 'primacy of love' to religious dogmas since the position from which Christianity enjoins us to love our neighbour as ourselves – ultimately, in the name of the absolute love of a substantive God – is precisely 'this gaping place from which nothingness interrogates us on our sex and our *existence*', that is to say,

11 As an nineteenth century positivist, Freud is no doubt more – naively – optimistic when he claims the following: 'I must contradict you when you go on to argue that men are completely unable to do without the consolation of the religious illusion [...] That is true, certainly, of the men into whom you have instilled the sweet – or bitter-sweet – poison from childhood onwards. But what of the other men, who have been sensibly brought up? [...] They will have to admit to themselves the full extent of their helplessness and their insignificance in the machinery of the universe [...] Men cannot remain children for ever; they must in the end go out into "hostile life". We may call this "education to reality". Need I confess to you that the whole purpose of my book is to point out the necessity for this forward step?' This step forward can, and must be accomplished, Freud adds, because 'it is possible for scientific work to gain some knowledge about the reality of the world, by means of which we can increase our power and in accordance with which we can arrange our life [...] Science has given us evidence by its numerous and important successes that it is no illusion', Freud 2001, p. 49, p. 55.

12 'You'll see that humanity will be cured of psychoanalysis. By keeping on soaking it into meaning, into religious meaning, of course, they will manage to repress this symptom' ('Le triomphe de la religion', p. 82). To sense how this repression is still ideologically perceived as a pressing concern, one should refer to works such as *Le livre noir de la psychanalyse*. Ironically, psychoanalysis is after all being attacked for not having meaning, given its alleged theoretical blunders and clinical frauds. For a persuasive defence of psychoanalysis at this general level, see Žižek 2006, pp. 3-9.

13 Lacan 2005, p. 79, p. 87, p. 83, p. 76.

the very place of the emergence of psychoanalysis.<sup>14</sup> If psychoanalysis intends to propose itself as an ethics of the *real*, which, since its beginnings, has in fact taken its cue from the symbolic irreducibility of questions such as 'What is sex, what is it for?' and 'How did I come into existence in this world?' (suffice it to mention as a paradigm the Little Hans case<sup>15</sup>), it will then necessarily have to tackle the use religion makes of love in *disavowing* these very questions. Unlike philosophy, which has capitulated at the exact moment when, in stopping to enquire about God, it also set aside the issue of love (for 'in philosophy, God has dominated the entire debate on love'<sup>16</sup>), psychoanalysis can still counter the triumph of religion to the extent that it manages to put forward a theory of love whereby the *semblance* of meaning is both neatly distinguished from truth as the function that signals the real *deadlock* of meaning, and thought dialectically together with it.<sup>17</sup>

As early as Seminar VII (1959-1960), Lacan disentangles the way in which the imaginary dimension underlying the command 'Love thy neighbour' disavows the real, with dangerous consequences.<sup>18</sup> The 'altruism' of Christian religion is profoundly *narcissistic*; it ambivalently conceals a 'Love your neighbour as *yourself*', which, by definition, does not accept the other as what remains most foreign to each of us. Lacan keeps on repeating throughout his writings and seminars that the more we eroticise the image of completeness provided by the body of our fellow humans perceived as a whole form, the less we refrain from aggressively competing with them. This form, or *Gestalt*, appears to us

14 Lacan 2005, p. 12, p. 61.

15 Let us not forget that, for Freud, Hans's phobia originates from the impossibility of being provided an adequate answer to two fundamental problems: his mother's sex ('Mummy, have you got a widdler too?'), and the birth of his sister ('The arrival of his sister brought into Hans's life many new elements, which from that time on gave him no rest. [...] He was faced with the great riddle of where babies come from', Freud 2001, pp. 132-133. Tellingly, his overcoming of the phobia coincides with 'our young investigator [having] merely come somewhat early upon the discovery that all *knowledge is patchwork, and that each step forward leaves an unsolved residue behind*' (ibid, p. 100, my emphasis). It is also worth noting that Hans himself refers to his phobia as 'nonsense' (ibid., pp. 49-50). We should read this lack of meaning together with the 'Ugh!' he emits upon seeing his mother's underwear: 'When I saw the yellow drawers I said "Ugh! That makes me spit!" and threw myself down and shut my eyes and didn't look' (ibid., p. 56). In this light, it seems to me that *Little Hans* is arguably the most 'Lacanian' of Freud's founding case-histories.

16 Lacan 1998c, p. 65.

17 Alain Badiou's work, for which love is a 'truth procedure', has shown that philosophy is itself still able to accomplish such a task. Tellingly, Lacan's theory of love stands, for Badiou, from this perspective, as a 'condition for the renaissance of philosophy', Badiou 2009, p. 83.

18 Seminar VII is contemporaneous with 'Discours aux catholiques'.

as the ideal unity where we would desire to *be, replacing* the other. But it is simply that with which we can actually achieve only an alienating identification, bound to intensify the – in the end, biological – disorder of our imagination. Insofar as Christianity revolves around the precept to love our brothers as ourselves, ‘and whoever they are, may they be *like us*’ – a message of fraternity which, in Seminar XIX, Lacan will closely connect with racism – hatred thus follows the love of the neighbour ‘as its shadow’.<sup>19</sup> Such a disquieting – and inevitable – facet of the Christian imperative was much feared by Freud: in the end, the love of the neighbour rests on a badly miscalculated endeavour to eliminate ‘my neighbour’s harmful, malignant *jouissance*’ – for instance, by giving him the other cheek when he attacks me – and, more in general, everything that seems to threaten his ideal unity but is in fact inextricable from it. This soon disastrously turns into an opposite attitude towards the other, since the same *jouissance* – the phallic *jouissance* of making One, and in particular its sadomasochism – reflexively ‘also dwells within me’.<sup>20</sup>

In this light, the passionate dedication to the other of saintly figures like Angela da Foligno, ‘who *joyfully* lapped up the water in which she had just washed the feet of lepers’, and the blessed Marie Allacoque, ‘who, with no less a reward in spiritual uplift, ate the excrement of a sick man’,<sup>21</sup> is ultimately supported by the implementation of a radically superegoic injunction to ‘fulfil the law’ – as St Paul has it – and to return to the alleged absolute *jouissance* of the mythical Thing – which Seminar XX significantly refers to as the *asexual* being One of God, of his essence. Such an attempted totalization of the symbolic order, which is doomed to fail, brings with it the disavowal of the real as the not-all of the symbolic, primarily in the guise of a disavowal of the real question about the sex of my neighbour: Why are there ‘men at one pole and women at the other’?<sup>22</sup> Christian love aims at the purification of the symbolic, the complete symbolization of the real, which with the same move would however eventually achieve a real-isation of the symbolic, and therefore its disappearance, along with that of sexual difference, at what Lacan

19 Lacan 2005, p. 62.

20 To put it simply, the philanthropy of St Martin and the devastation of the crusaders are, for Lacan, governed by the same totalising logic.

21 Lacan 1992, p. 188 (my emphasis).

22 Lacan 1998c, p. 12. For psychoanalysis this question then invariably leads to *Was will das Weib?* – since the Other sex is invariably woman, for both man and woman – which Freud himself ‘expressly’ left aside, Lacan admits in Seminar XX (p. 80).

himself calls the ‘point of apocalypse’.<sup>23</sup>

Christianity – and, in particular, the love of the Christian God as a world-order from which the order to love the neighbour is issued<sup>24</sup> – likewise disavows the real with regard to the logical impasse evidenced by any serious interrogation about existence. But throughout ‘Le triomphe de la religion’, and in various passages from Seminar XX, Lacan unexpectedly introduces the religion of Christ as ‘*la vraie religion*’.<sup>25</sup> To put it briefly, Christianity would amount to the ‘true religion’ inasmuch as, more than any other religion, it comes *near* to the materialist truth of the emergence of the signifier alongside a void (Lacan always opposes his materialist dialectic of the signifier and the void to any naïve philosophical materialism for which matter is all that exists). According to him, the religious *ex nihilo* of the *logos*, the ‘In the beginning was the Word’ that somehow borders on the psychoanalytic identification of the *logos* with the *nihil*,<sup>26</sup> should be understood as the specific feature that differentiates Christianity from the other monotheistic religions that are also creationist. For instance, to distinguish Christianity as a ‘true’ religion from Judaism, one needs to ask the following: ‘In the beginning was the Word [*parole*]. Yes, correct. But where was the Word before the beginning?’. Lacan suggests that, for Jews, the Word was *in God* before the beginning, or, ‘the Word was before the beginning’, whereas for Christians the Word is that by means of which ‘God created the world’ and cannot precede such a creation.<sup>27</sup>

23 Lacan 1992, p. 207.

24 Clearly, this account is partial in that it does not take into consideration the subtleties and multifaceted value of love in Christian Trinitarian theology (e.g. with regard to the Holy Spirit, whose first gift is indeed love, although the Holy Spirit is at the same time embodied in Jesus, as ‘the Beloved Son’, at the moment of his baptism) (see Galatians 5:22-23; see also Mt 3:17; Mk 1:11; Lk 3:21-22).

25 See, for example Lacan 2005, p. 81; Lacan 1998c, p. 107.

26 This is *not* to say that Lacan believes in creationism. Language does not proceed *from* the void through the act of a transcendent will. Language is concomitant with the void, which does not precede it. “‘God has created the world from nothingness’ is the refusal of logic’, Lacan says at one point in Seminar XIX (p. 52). Yet there are passages, even in his late work, where he fails to sufficiently mark the difference between his theory of the signifier and creationism, which can give rise to dangerous misunderstandings (see for example Seminar XX, p. 41). I read these instances in the context of his polemics against the teleology of mainstream evolutionary theory – its regarding man as the ‘pinnacle of creation’, Lacan 1991b, p. 48 – but the issue remains open and should be further discussed elsewhere.

27 Lacan 2005, p. 89. This distinction is no doubt debatable. Addressing it further lies however beyond our remit here. Let us simply stress that Lacan’s point is supported by those scholars who contend that Genesis 1, and more generally the Hebrew Bible, was not initially interested in a) positing God as the creator of the world (rather than as the shaper of destiny out of a pre-existing formless matter) and b) before its encounter with Greek philosophy, conceiving creation as enacted by means of the creative Word.

Most importantly, Christianity is a 'true' religion because the birth of Christ, as God's Word or *logos* incarnated in the body of a miserable member of the *homo sapiens* species ('the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us'<sup>28</sup>), *redoubles* the paradox of the incarnation of the symbolic in man, in what Lacan names 'a repugnant carnal being' who is 'ravaged by the Word'.<sup>29</sup> He can thus affirm that the statements 'in the beginning was the Word' and 'the speaking being is a sick animal' – first and foremost sexually, for language cannot represent sex, which hence remains a logical impossibility – point in the same direction.<sup>30</sup> Yet, and this is crucial, Lacan's argument clearly implies that Christian religion is the 'true' religion only inasmuch as it is *less false* than other religions. Christianity is still a *religion* and as such it disavows the real which emerges concomitantly with the signifier as its irreducible void. More precisely, Christ's coming into existence in this world, his embodying concretely God's love for man, disavows the logical impasse concerning the appearance of language in man – that is, ultimately, the question of anthropogenesis, the real question about existence. Why? Because it gives dogmatically to this truthful impasse an unprecedented *meaning*: Christ has become one of us to spread the word, the good news that the love of God may eventually save us. Therefore, it is exactly the proximity of Christianity to truth that makes it the worst enemy of psychoanalysis. If, on the one hand, Christianity as 'true' religion is the least untruthful and hence most meaningless of all religions, on the other hand, it insidiously recuperates meaning at the very level of truth as meaninglessness. In different terms, it explicitly turns the incompleteness of the symbolic into

28 Jn 1:14.

29 'Lacan 2005, p. 90.

30 Ibid., p. 93.

the definitive reason to believe in its completeness.<sup>31</sup>

Against this redemptive value of the Christian love of God, in Seminar XX, Lacan advances a psychoanalytic theory of sexualisation that closely associates love with exorcising God, an operation I have earlier defined as 'para-theological', as lying beside theology and not simply in opposition to it (and which will ultimately pave the way for a sophisticated form of materialist agnosticism). God provisionally stands here as a profane yet unsurpassable hypothesis about the Other, namely, about the structural oscillation of the symbolic order of language between its making One and its being not-One, its producing the semblance of unity and this very production's reliance on the maintenance of a non-totality. In this non-religious framework – marked by the irreconcilability of two 'divine' faces which both immanently derive from the fact that we are speaking animals<sup>32</sup> – love definitely sides with the semblance of unity ('a kind of mirage of the One you believe yourself to be'<sup>33</sup>), that is, with meaning. Unlike Christianity, Lacan does not equate meaning with truth. Truth is not the eventual meaning of an apparently meaningless meaning.<sup>34</sup> Meaning is provided by the phallic logic of the signifier, which can temporarily be sutured as a whole thanks to love as a 'desire to be One'.<sup>35</sup> Truth amounts to the function that marks the real absence of the sexual relationship – i.e. the impossibility of

31 Consequently, the more Christianity highlights meaninglessness as truth, like in Protestantism, the less it accepts truth in favour of meaning. This paradox could explain Lacan's recurrent specification that Christianity as the 'true' religion is ultimately 'the Roman one' (see for example, 'Le triomphe de la religion', p. 81), where the stress on meaninglessness as truth is less evident. Yet, as is well-known, Lacan also praises Luther (Protestant meaninglessness without truth in his view?). On the one hand, the history of Christianity's relation to truth he traces in the beautiful pages he dedicates to the baroque in Seminar XX ends up with a vehement defence of the Counter-Reformation and its aesthetic 'exaltation of obscenity' as a return to the Gospels, to 'bringing back what we call the world [*monde*] to its filthy truth [*vérité d'immondice*]', Lacan 1998c, pp. 107-116. On the other hand, in Seminar VII, it is rather Luther who, in very similar terms, 'renewed the very basis of Christian teaching when he sought to express our dereliction, our fall in [this] world'; Luther's 'You are that waste matter which falls into the world from the devil's anus' is nothing less than what 'Freud came to give his approval, his official stamp, when he made that image of the world [...] return once and for all there where [it] belong[s], that is in our body', Lacan 1992, pp. 92-93.

32 See Chapter 1 of Chiesa, forthcoming

33 Lacan 1998c, p. 47.

34 See Lacan 2011, p. 186.

35 Lacan 1998c, p. 6. This late definition of love as a *desire* to be One which is also a desire to *be One* seems to contain both *agape* and *eros* (as well as *philia*). Lacan's reading of the *Symposium* in Seminar VIII, on the other hand, draws on the distinction between *agape* and *eros*. Yet, already here, he does not fail to note that these two terms are 'incredibly opposed' in Anders Nygren's seminal work on the topic, Lacan 1991a, p. 26.

enunciating this relationship as One, or to put it differently, ‘the absence of any sexual meaning’<sup>36</sup> – which comes logically prior to the phallic logic of the signifier and can never be fully sublated by it.<sup>37</sup> In other words, love strives to give a meaning to the resulting *ab-sexe* – the sexual absence-abscess Lacan refers to in his 1973 article ‘L’Étourdit’ – and, above all, succeeds partly in this task (that is to say, to the extent that copulation as well as sexual reproduction do indeed occur in the *homo sapiens* species). And yet, invariably, ‘the duet’, or duo of love is ‘not the sexual relationship’, Lacan reminds us; rather, love precisely ‘revolve[s] around the fact that there’s no such thing as a sexual relationship’.<sup>38</sup>

At this stage, the seminal question that, in his discussion of sexuation as well as elsewhere, Lacan surprisingly leaves in the background and that we instead need to tackle overtly is the following: does the absence of the sexual relationship allow any room for *true* love? Lacan’s underestimation of the issue at stake appears to clash with his intention to develop a new irreligious discourse on love as much as with his recrimination that philosophy has done with it far too quickly. Does he think that love can sometimes, in certain circumstances, be truthful in spite of the non-absoluteness, the ultimate meaninglessness that it logically presupposes and seems to confine it to the realm of a – palliative but also potentially lethal – narcissistic illusion? Or should we take the claim according to which true ‘love is impossible [since] the sexual relationship drops into the abyss of nonsense’<sup>39</sup> as his last word on the matter? If the recognition of the fact that love is never true in the sense of absolute outside of religion – ‘an absolute love, that is an impossible love’<sup>40</sup> – were a sufficient reason for its unconditional untruthfulness, how should we then understand Lacan’s speaking in the same years of ‘a healthy idea of love’?<sup>41</sup> Is the latter just a *critical* – or even sarcastic – idea aimed at unmasking love as a semblance? But in this case, does the avoidance of a systematic enquiry into what *could* make

36 See Badiou 2010, p. 111.

37 Here we are distinguishing the phallic function as truth of incompleteness from this very function’s establishing itself as a signifying logic (of the semblance) of the One, although these two aspects of sexuation are co-implied.

38 Lacan 1998c, p. 57.

39 Ibid., p. 87.

40 Lacan 2005, p. 63.

41 ‘Je parle aux murs’, p. 104.

love both true *and* compatible with the truth of incompleteness not run the risk of indirectly promoting its religious re-appropriation by a more subtle discourse on absolute meaning (for example, a psychoanalytic religion of fusal love<sup>42</sup>), which is what Lacanian psychoanalysis set out to oppose in the first place?

I would argue that Lacan’s theory of love remains overall unvaried throughout his oeuvre, especially with regard to what constitutes its biological basis and the main coordinates of its phenomenology. Biologically, love is the result of a ‘disorder of the imagination’ pertaining to the nature of the speaking animals of the *homo sapiens* species, and of the intricate dialectic of alienation and identification that both issues from such a real impasse and tries to cope with it. This very point, already present in Seminar I, is further developed through the idea of the absence of the sexual relationship and of the ensuing phallic logic of the signifier that corks it, albeit with difficulty. If Seminar XX, the work in which Lacan measures the limits of love vis-à-vis the *il n’y a pas de rapport sexuel*, still insists on the fact that humans are, as a species, fundamentally ‘unhealthy’, ten years earlier, Seminar XI already anticipates the positing of the absence of the sexual relationship as the point of departure of psychoanalysis by discussing how the biological function of reproduction cannot be ‘represented as such’ symbolically, how ‘in the psyche, there is nothing by which the subject may situate himself as a male or female being’ – while such a sexual localisation can only be achieved in a complex and precarious manner by means of culturally mediated ‘equivalents’ (i.e. the phallic function).<sup>43</sup>

In parallel, Lacan continues to repeat that, in line with these biological premises, a privileged way to approach the appearance of the phenomenon of love in its conjunction with the absence of the sexual relationship is given by the transference (emerging from the concrete setting of psychoanalytic praxis, transference provides an ‘experimental model’ to test the structural foundations of love as applicable even to its ‘natural’ forms, that is, outside of psychoanalysis<sup>44</sup>). He also insists that transference-love should be conceptualised via a return to the Freudian notions of ego, ideal ego, and ego-ideal with reference to the unfolding and resolution of the Oedipus complex. Lacan’s claim,

42 See Lacan’s unrelenting dismissal of Michael Balint’s ideal of ‘genital love’ (for example in Lacan 1992, pp. 8-9, but already throughout Seminar I).

43 Lacan 1998, p. 116. Lacan 1998b, p. 204.

44 See *ibid.*, p. 125.

in Seminar I, that love may be regarded as a 'power binding subjects', a 'pact',<sup>45</sup> that is, an unstable symbolic balancing of the aggressivity inherent to imaginary identifications, whereby the Father as ego-ideal 'regulates'<sup>46</sup> the potentially catastrophic effects of the confrontation with the ideal image of the other (the ideal ego), still echoes in Seminar XI's close association of such a pacifying psychical 'deceit' [*tromperie*] with 'the point of the ego-ideal [...] from which the subject will see himself, as one says, *as seen by the other*'.<sup>47</sup> Although it becomes possibly harder to detect it given the increasing subtlety of Lacan's overall theory of sexualisation, the same argument also re-emerges in Seminar XIX B's suggestion that the phallic function can partly overcome the 'disappearance' [*evanouissement*] of the sexual partner precisely by promoting a fragile triangulation between the phallic universality of man and the phallic incompleteness of woman around, once again, the 'ideal point' of the Father. The latter is the 'exception' woman loves – as the 'at-least-one' [*au-moins-un*] not to be subjected to castration – and man identifies with. Using the same terminology he adopted in Seminar XI, Lacan does not fail to specify that we are dealing here with 'the only point where the duality [between the sexes] has a chance to be represented'.<sup>48</sup>

Having said this – that is, having evidenced Lacan's Freudianism with respect to the way in which he understands the phenomenon of love in the psychoanalytic setting and beyond – it is undeniable that the Freudian *meta-psychology* derived from such an – initially clinical – phenomenology (in brief, the meta-psychology of *Eros* and *Thanatos* as the life and death instincts) becomes increasingly exposed to Lacan's attacks in later Seminars, especially beginning with the early 1970s. In open contrast to the main onto-biological argument of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Seminar XIX B thoroughly criticises the possibility of considering *Eros* as a 'sort of essence, which would tend to make One out of two'.<sup>49</sup> In other words, for Lacan, love as a *desire* to be one remains a structural effect of *non*-totalization, and thus does not in the

45 Lacan 1988a, pp. 110-112, p. 174.

46 Ibid., p. 141.

47 Lacan 1998b, p. 268 (my emphasis).

48 Lacan 2011, pp. 107-108. 'Chance' is not rhetorical: it signals the key role of contingency, as non-impossibility, in sexualisation.

49 Ibid., p. 107.

least – tend to – make One outside of the dimension of imaginary deceit: 'Everyone knows, of course, that two have never become one'.<sup>50</sup> In this context, Freud's science amounts to nothing else than a 'vulgar myth' that takes for granted a 'founding force of life, of the life instinct', which would be wholly contained by 'Eros [as] a principle of union', by 'this bizarre assimilation of Eros with what tends to coagulate'.<sup>51</sup> In so doing, ultimately, 'Freud promotes the One', which Lacan is, on the contrary, trying to fight off.<sup>52</sup>

It is precisely in opposition to the old meta-psychology of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* – as an 'exorcism' against *Eros*, Seminar XIX B specifies<sup>53</sup> – that Lacan further unravels his theory of love, which can now no longer directly be accounted for within a Freudian framework, not only biologically but also logically.<sup>54</sup> Freud was right in observing that the unconscious does not respect the principle of contradiction, yet, 'it is not sufficient that Freud has said that the unconscious does not know contradiction for it not to be the promised land of logic. Have we arrived in this century without knowing that logic can easily do without the principle of contradiction?'<sup>55</sup> Lacan's new logic of the amorous phenomenon consists first and foremost in a speculation on the *number* of love, which is neither simply the one nor the two, since love always presupposes the real 'not-two' [*pas deux*]<sup>56</sup> of the absence of the sexual relationship: there is one sex – the masculine – which makes One, and the Other sex – the feminine – which can never be reduced to *an*-other sex, another One. Such a logic finds its most complete elaboration

50 Lacan 1998c, p. 47.

51 Lacan 2011, p. 157, p. 126.

52 Ibid., p. 126.

53 Ibid., p. 157. We can then conclude that there is no exorcism of God without an exorcism of love, and vice versa.

54 This is not incompatible with Lacan's earlier appreciation, especially in Seminar II, of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* for the way in which it highlights repetition as a structural component of the linguistic body of the speaking animal. In the 1970s, such a Freudian element is still valid, but only if the pleasure principle, with which repetition would allegedly be in contrast, is no longer seen as a principle ('Repetition, this is where Freud discovers the beyond the pleasure principle. But of course, if there is a beyond, we should not talk about a principle. A principle where there is a beyond is no longer a principle. Let's also leave aside, with the same move, the reality principle. This needs to be revised in its entirety. There aren't two classes of speaking beings, those who govern themselves according to the pleasure and reality principles, and those who are beyond the pleasure principle') ('Je parle aux murs', p. 27).

55 Lacan 2011, p. 48.

56 See *ibid.*, p. 186.

starting from Seminar XVIII with the so-called 'formulas of sexuation', a daring attempt to dismantle Aristotle's logical modalities through an original appropriation – but also a critique – of Frege's notion of function and theory of numbers.

I believe these are the issues we need to consider initially in order to try to establish whether there is, in Lacan, a positive notion of non-narcissistic, true love.<sup>57</sup> If, as Seminar XX makes clear, love is phallically always a *ménage à trois* with God, and thus yet another figure of the One, can we envision a way in which the *not-two* of the absent sexual relationship does not, in love, necessarily turn into such a unitary three? How many do we have to be to be *truly* in love without God?

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57 A detailed exploration of the phallic function as our species-specific logic of sexuation/subjectivation is the main topic of my forthcoming *The Not-Two: Logic and God in Lacan*.

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