



On God in Lacan: A Response to Tina Beattie

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Abstract

Tina Beattie has re-read Aquinas in the light of Lacanian theory and found the later Lacan's transition to what he calls the register of "the Real" to be significant for a revitalised theology beyond traditional intellectual categories. She argues for a maternal Trinity which she believes to lie hidden in Thomas and, in support of this, she contends that Lacan left behind Freud's paternal preoccupations in favour of maternity. This response to Beattie will re-examine Lacan's trajectory from "the Symbolic" register to "the Real" through the lens of what he said in his year-long seminars about Moses, whom he regarded as a representative of "the Symbolic", and it will demonstrate that paternity remained a constant in Lacan, who even came to see "the Real" itself as a name of the father.

Keywords

Thomas Aquinas, Jacques Lacan, Moses, theology, psychoanalysis

Introduction

The dialogue between Lacanian psychoanalysis and theology continues to flourish. Lacanian theory has been applied to theological language in postmodernity by Edith Wyschogrod, David Crownfield, and Carl A. Raschke.¹ Marcus Pound has found significant convergences between the thought of Jacques Lacan and Christian doctrine, particularly on the Eucharist, and has attempted to correlate psychological trauma and the experience of the divine.² Creston Davis, Pound, and Clayton Crockett have edited a collection of essays arguing

¹ Edith Wyschogrod, David Crownfield, Carl A. Raschke, *Lacan and Theological Discourse*, New York: SUNY Press, 1989.

² Marcus Pound, *Theology, Psychoanalysis and Trauma*, London: SCM, 2007; 'Lacan's Return to Freud: A Case of Theological Ressourcement?', in Gabriel Flynn, Paul D. Murray, *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 440-456.

for a theology beyond what Lacan calls “the Big Other”, the field of language.³ For his part, Tad DeLay has picked up on a remark of Lacan that “God is unconscious”.⁴ And, in this journal, Tina Beattie’s impressive re-reading of Aquinas has explored the later Lacan for resources with which to construct a renewed theology beyond traditional ways of speaking about God.⁵ This response to Beattie will re-examine the trajectory in Lacan from the subjective register of “the Symbolic”, the domain of language, to the extra-linguistic register of what he calls “the Real”, and it will do so through the lens of what Lacan had to say over the years in his seminars about Moses as a representative of the Symbolic. We will see that Beattie is right in thinking that the development in Lacan does open up a new perspective, not just for psychoanalysis, but for theology. But it will also be argued that the later Lacan’s talk about the Real is more about restoring the balance between his subjective registers than, as Beattie claims, a shift from the paternal to the maternal.

Beattie’s Lacanian Theology

Tina Beattie argues that ideas of God, nature and gender are tethered together in the labyrinths of language, and so she turns to Lacan and his linguistic return to Freud for a guide towards what she calls the “incarnate Other” of Thomas’ One God. In this, Beattie is attempting to transcend the Aristotelianism of Aquinas in favour of an incarnate maternal Trinity which, she believes, lies hidden in his theology. The result, she argues, is a renewed Thomism which can more adequately respond to contemporary questions about gender, nature, and God. And Beattie has opted to concentrate on the question of desire, since it is in the dynamism of human desire that there are clear convergences and differences between Aquinas and Lacan.⁶

Beattie sees Thomas as more of a mystical theologian than a philosopher when he finds the generation of the Word in God to be

³ Creston Davis, Marcus Pound, Clayton Crockett, *Theology after Lacan. The Passion for the Real*, Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2015.

⁴ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (London: Vintage, 1998), p. 59; Tad DeLay, *God is Unconscious. Psychoanalysis and Theology*, Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2015.

⁵ Tina Beattie, *Theology after Postmodernity. Divining the Void – A Lacanian Reading of Thomas Aquinas*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013; ‘Deforming God: Why Nothing Really Matters. A Lacanian Reading of Thomas Aquinas’, *New Blackfriars* 95 (2014), pp. 218-233.

⁶ Beattie, ‘Deforming God’, p. 220; Thomas Dalzell, ‘Balthasar’s Theological Aesthetics and Lacanian Psychoanalysis’, *Irish Theological Quarterly* 69 (2004), pp. 3-16 at p. 12.

suggestive of conception by a mother. She interprets a passage from his *Commentary on Boethius's Trinity* in terms of the birthing of the Son as feminised Wisdom from a maternal Father and she regards this as his “most lavish expression of a maternal trinitarian theology” and as an indication of a “m(O)therness” to Thomas’s God.⁷ For Beattie, it is a deconstruction by Aquinas of his own Aristotelian categories of inseminating paternal form and maternal matter. And, in addition, she proposes the mysticism of St. Catherine of Siena as an Other of Thomas’s intellect since, for Catherine, the true God is only found in embodied rapture.

To understand Beattie’s use of Lacan, it is essential to demystify some of the notoriously enigmatic Lacanian jargon. What is most relevant is Lacan’s positing three registers in human subjectivity: “the Real”, in which he locates everything outside language, everything we struggle to put words on, such as trauma, enjoyment, and death; “the Symbolic”, also called the “Big Other”, which is the realm of language and is made up of signifiers or words and bits and pieces of words; and “the Imaginary”, which, dating from what Lacan calls the “mirror stage”,⁸ provides the infant with a unified ego, a body-image and, later, signifieds in the process of making sense of signifiers. The later Lacan illustrates this conception of subjectivity by means of three linked circles – representing the Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary registers – and he calls the structure “Borromean” because, like the knot of that name, the three are linked in such a way that if one breaks free, the whole construct falls apart.

Beattie’s project is to bring Thomas and Lacan into creative dialogue, and so she draws on Lacan’s view that sexual difference is not determined by biological organs, but different relations in the sexes to what the French call “*jouissance*” or enjoyment. Feminine *jouissance* is said by Lacan to be “Other”, in the sense of being beyond Symbolic or what he calls “phallic” enjoyment, and he locates it outside language in the register of the Real. More importantly, he correlates this feminine *jouissance* – “Other *jouissance*” – and the experience of God because of their common “infinite,” and so Beattie urges Christianity to discover the “Other” of Thomas’s God, the God beyond Lacan’s Symbolic register, the God in the Real.

Beattie is to be commended for opening the theological imagination to mysteries beyond its ken by taking the deliberately obtuse and at times inaccessible Lacan as her guide to re-read Thomas. Her

⁷ Aquinas, *On Boethius on the Trinity – Questions 1-4*. Trans. Rose E. Brennan (St. Louis: Herder, 1946), pp. 356-361; Beattie, *Theology after Postmodernity*, p. 359; ‘Deforming God’, pp. 232; 225.

⁸ Lacan, ‘The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience’, *Écrits*. Trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), pp. 75-81.

project of bringing these great minds into theological conversation, rather than simply outlining the influence of Aquinas on Lacan, is largely successful. In particular, she is clearly onto something when she finds the later Lacan's shift in concentration from the register of the Symbolic to that of the Real – despite the “nihilism” she perceives in the latter – to be a rich resource for a renewed theology beyond traditional language for God, a theology which is not rational alone, but one which resonates with human desire. However, Beattie's argument rests on the assumption that Lacan increasingly left behind Freud's paternal preoccupations in favour of “the maternal”.⁹ This is not so clear. It is true that Lacan did go beyond Freud's taking the male to be the norm of sexuality (*nor-mâle*) by developing his theory of an absence of rapport between the sexes, in the sense of the sexes having different relations to *jouissance*, and that this helped him to make renewed sense of both feminine *jouissance* and religious experience. But that this development represents a move towards the maternal says more about Beattie's central concerns. Despite her claim that Luce Irigaray – whose critique of Lacan's phallocentrism has marked Beattie's own reading – influenced Lacan's later seminars,¹⁰ the theme of the father remained a constant in Lacan, with the later Lacan even recognising the Real and Imaginary registers as “names of the father”, rather than the Symbolic alone as had previously been the case. It is unfortunate, therefore, that Beattie does not engage with Lacan's rather late *Sinthome* seminar from 1975–1976,¹¹ the very title of which in French alludes to St. Thomas, and which demonstrates clinically how the writer James Joyce could make up for the foreclosure in him of the “Name of the father” which affected his knotting of the three subjective registers.

Lacan's “Atheism”

Where Beattie regards Lacan as an “atheist Thomist” who turned to psychoanalysis in a failed attempt to escape the God of his Catholic upbringing,¹² it remains an open question whether his seminars are consistently atheistic or not. Lacan himself, despite the certainty of some, including Elisabeth Roudinesco, Michael Martin, and Pound,¹³ was always reluctant to declare his hand, his intention being to make

⁹ Beattie, *Theology after Postmodernity*, pp. 25; 32.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹¹ Lacan, *Le Sinthome. Séminaire 1975-1976*, Paris: Éditions de l'Association Lacanienne Internationale, 2012.

¹² Beattie, ‘Deforming God’, p. 219.

¹³ Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan & Co. A History of Psychoanalysis in France, 1925-1985* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 104; 679); Michael Martin, *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007);

his followers question the implications of their own decision for atheism or theism. His being married in a Catholic church, having his children baptised, and his expressing the wish for a Catholic funeral could be understood, perhaps, as only expressions of cultural Catholicism, but his brother, Marc-Marie, a Benedictine monk, maintained that Lacan did believe in God.¹⁴ While this remains undecided, what is clear from his year-long seminars is that he does not believe in the God installed in what he calls the “Big Other”, the Symbolic Other, the human subject’s register of language. And yet, if Lacan refuses to believe in that God, he sets out to prove the “existence” of God in another register, God as the Other of that Symbolic Other, the Other in the Real which escapes symbolisation by language. Unlike many of those attending his seminars, Lacan is not dismissive of religion. He is aware of its benefits. Religion, he thinks, can act as a defence against the Real, death, for example, and, to his mind, religious experience, religious doctrines, and the history of heresies, all belong to the psychoanalytic field of enquiry.¹⁵ Hence his attracting numerous academic priests and religious to his seminars in Paris, including Michel de Certeau, Louis Beirnaert, whom he invited to speak on Augustine,¹⁶ and Antoine Vergote. He even thinks that religion will triumph over psychoanalysis.¹⁷ More importantly, Lacan contends that the God of the Big Other, the Symbolic Other, the realm of the signifier, is not easy to eliminate, since the latter remains at the horizon of all speech. True atheism, in his view, is difficult for speaking beings therefore, because God as the Symbolic Other is present as soon as they speak. As long as something is said, Lacan maintains, the question of God will be there.¹⁸ But this is the God he does not believe in, the later Lacan in any case, the God of the Symbolic Other, and as his seminars progress he turns his attention to the experience of God in the register of the Real, the God he will later speak about as an Other of the Other.

Marcus Pound, ‘The Assumption of Desire: Kierkegaard, Lacan, and the Trauma of the Eucharist’, *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 9 (2008), pp. 67-78.

¹⁴ Paul Roazen, ‘Lacan’s First Disciple’, *Journal of Religion and Health* 35 (1996), pp. 321-336 at p. 324.

¹⁵ Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book VII*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 130; 170-171.

¹⁶ Lacan, *Freud’s Papers on Technique 1953-1954. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book I*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988), pp. 248-260.

¹⁷ Lacan, *Le Triomphe de la religion*. Précédé de *Discours aux Catholiques* (Paris: Seuil, 2005), p. 79.

¹⁸ Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan. Livre XVI. D’un Autre à l’autre*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 2006), p. 343; *Encore. On Feminine Sexuality. The Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972-1973. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XX*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), p. 45.

Lacan's Moses

Whatever about Lacan, Freud clearly was an atheist. But Lacan would argue that Freud did not do away with religion either. Freud too saw its benefits, he notes, above all in relation to guilt. In particular, Freud was fascinated by Moses, having visited the Moses of Michelangelo in Rome every day for three weeks in 1912,¹⁹ and, in Seminar VII, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan tells his hearers that every analyst should know Freud's text, *Moses and Monotheism*, off by heart.²⁰ In this late work by Freud, Moses was not an emigrant, the son of Levite parents who had gone down to Egypt, but an Egyptian, as his name suggests. Moses had accepted the religion of Akhenaton, Freud suggests, monotheism rather than polytheism. And like the later monotheism of the Jewish people, this religion not only insisted on circumcision, but forbade images of God. When Akenaton died, his empire collapsed, as did his new religion, and so, according to Freud, Moses led the immigrants out of Egypt in the Exodus, but was later killed by them for his insistence on monotheistic religion. Of course, Freud recognised that his Egyptian Moses would be called into question by the work of historians such as Eduard Meyer. According to Meyer, Moses was a Midianite, the son in law of Jethro, who founded a new religion devoted to Yahweh at Kadesh.²¹ But, for Freud, this other Moses, Moses the Midianite, was a token of repression, his point being that those who had been in Egypt had their motives for wanting to forget what they had done to Moses the Egyptian. Against Meyer, Freud was able to draw on the exegetical work of Ernst Sellin which claimed that Moses was not only Egyptian, but was murdered for being a prophet.²² Sellin even argued that the Suffering Servant of Deutero-Isaiah was Moses himself, something he later retracted, and that his murder was the basis of messianism. Freud's own interpretation was that the followers of Moses preferred the fleshpots of Egypt and they killed him for his monotheistic religion and its regulations.

What is relevant to Lacan in *Moses and Monotheism* is Freud's linking the monotheism of Moses to a religion of the father. Freud's text draws on his earlier work, *Totem and Taboo*, which had already traced the origins of religion back to patricide by Darwin's

¹⁹ Freud, *Briefe 1873-1939* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1980), p. 431.

²⁰ Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book VII*. Ed Jacques Alain Miller (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 173; Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*. Standard Edition 23 (London: Vintage, 2001), pp. 3-137).

²¹ Eduard Meyer, *Die Israeliten und ihre Nachbarstämme. Alttestamentliche Untersuchungen* (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1906), p. 60; Freud, op. cit., p. 33; 68.

²² Ernst Sellin, *Mose und seine Bedeutung für die israelitisch-jüdische Religionsgeschichte*, Leipzig: Deichert, 1922.

primal horde.²³ For Freud, Moses' monotheistic God was the re-establishment of the supremacy of the father of the primitive horde. In his view, the killing of the primal father was a trauma and the memory of that *Urtat* was repressed. But, like everything repressed, it returned in the murder of Moses and later in the murder of Christ. As Freud put it, "people have always known that they had a primal father and killed him".²⁴ Lacan, for his part, remarks in Seminar III. *The Psychoses*, that Freud's preoccupation in *Moses and Monotheism* is with how the dimension of truth enters a human subject through the father.²⁵ In fact, it can be argued that Freud's concern throughout his work was to save the function of the father. Lacan is a faithful follower of Freud, and yet, as his seminars progress, he becomes increasingly interested in the question: "what is a woman?", not "what is a father?". But Freud's Moses suits Lacan's purposes, particularly in his Symbolic phase. Lacan had initially concentrated on the Imaginary register ever since he had discovered the importance of the mirror stage, the stage at which a child identifies with the image in the mirror and moves from a lack of bodily coordination to a sense of unity. But in his second phase, Lacan focusses on the Symbolic realm, on the unconscious being structured like a language, and on the "Name of the Father", *Nom du Père*, which in French sounds like the "No of the Father". His argument is that this No of the Father takes the place in the child of the desire of the mother – his linguistic version of Freud's Oedipus complex – and limits *jouissance* and regulates meaning-making. It is in this Symbolic phase that his attention is drawn to Freud's Moses. He makes it clear that he is not following Freud's atheistic profession of faith, but that he finds the patricidal myth of *Moses and Monotheism* very suitable for a time when God is being said to be dead. He finds it remarkable that Freud's myth is so close to the Christian tradition, the message of monotheism being completed in the murder of Christ as a repetition of the murder of Moses, as Freud understood it, and an echo of the inaugural murder of the primitive father. He is surprised at the Christocentrism in Freud's text and he thinks there must have been a reason for Freud slipping into it without realising it. For Lacan himself, the father may be dead, but his own Name-of-the-Father, the paternal No to the oedipal child, lives on.²⁶ Hence, to the remark in *The Brothers Karamazov* that if God does not exist, everything is permitted, Lacan can reply: "if God is dead, nothing is

²³ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*. Standard Edition 13 (London: Vintage, 2001), pp. 141-143.

²⁴ Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, pp. 105; 85-86.

²⁵ Lacan, *The Psychoses 1955-1956. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book III*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 214.

²⁶ Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, pp. 192; 176-177; *D'un Autre à l'autre*, p. 151.

permitted”.²⁷ What he means is that, as in Freud, the killing of the father actually establishes the paternal function in human subjectivity. Nor does he go along with his contemporaries who claim that God is dead. In fact, he suspects that the “God is dead” movement might be a defence against castration. Above all, his argument is that Freud was not doing away with the God based on his primal father, but defending the father by grounding the paternal psychological function in his murder. For Lacan himself, rather than dead, God is very much alive in the effects of language and of law experienced by the human subject. Hence his being able to respond to the idea that “God is dead” by claiming that God is still with us as the omniscient, all-seeing Other.²⁸

From the Symbolic to the Real

Lacan’s concentration in the 1930s and 1940s on the Imaginary register, the narcissistic realm of the Ego, came to an end, as was mentioned earlier, in the early 1950s in favour of the Symbolic register. In this phase of his work, Lacan can claim that it is not for nothing that the incarnate God is called the Word. Where he thinks that Freud’s God corresponds to the god of philosophy, the Supreme Being, his own God, after this shift to the Symbolic, corresponds to the position of what he now calls “Symbolic father”. He regards non-monotheistic religions, polytheistic religions, as classifications of the Imaginary – hence his interest in Akanaton’s forbidding images – but he understands Moses’s monotheism to be Symbolic, noting that the Mosaic commandments say: “thou shalt not make a carved image of me”. In *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, it is argued that the Temple was designed to avoid images and was only the shelter for the Ark of the Covenant, a pure symbol of pact. In other words, the Temple was an expression of the Symbolic. And Lacan even wonders if the reason the Temple was destroyed was because it represented the Symbolic order.²⁹

In this Symbolic phase of Lacan, the experience of God is based on the calculus of signifiers in the Symbolic Other – the subject’s

²⁷ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*. Trans. Andrew MacAndrew (New York: Bantam, 1983), p. 788; Lacan, ‘Theoretical Introduction to the Functions of Psychoanalysis in Criminology’, *Écrits*, pp. 102-122 at p. 106; *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, pp. 496; 27.

²⁸ Lacan, *RSI. Séminaire 1974-1975* (Paris: Éditions de l’Association Lacanienne Internationale, 2002), p. 38; Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan. Livre X. L’angoisse 1962-1963*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 2004), pp. 356-358.

²⁹ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book IX. Identification 1961-62*. Trans. Cormac Gallagher. Unpublished, seminar XXIV, p. 13; *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan. Livre IV. La relation d’objet 1956-1957*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1994), p. 210; *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, p. 175.

unconscious battery of words and word-particles – alongside the god of philosophy.³⁰ But, even at this stage, he does not accept philosophy's confusion of God with Being. In fact, Lacan would trace that confusion back to a misunderstanding of God's reply to Freud's other Moses, Moses the Midianite. He objects to God's name, *ehyeh asher ehyeh* (Ex 3:14), being interpreted in terms of ontology, "I am who am" or "I am the one who is".³¹ On the one hand, his difficulty with this is that the "I" derives from the Imaginary register; it is fictive, in his view, because it originates in the infant's self-misrecognition in the mirror and identification with an alien image.³² What is important about God's reply to Moses, to his mind, is that it conceals the truth of God's name, just as the human I conceals the truth of the unconscious subject. On the other hand, and more importantly, Lacan thinks that God's reply to Moses has nothing to do with the "is-ness" of God. Where the god of the philosophers, Being, is one and unified knowledge of everything about everything, Lacan's Symbolic Other is divided. In his view, not only the human subject, but the Symbolic Other and the God he equates with it, are incomplete. Hence, like Pascal, his preference for the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob over the god of the philosophers. What is distinctive about the God of revelation, according to Lacan, is not that God is one, but that God is a speaking subject.

Beattie makes much of the change of emphasis in Lacan from the Symbolic to the Real and she is right to think that it opens up new possibilities for both psychoanalysis and theology. The question for the later Lacan is not whether God is, as the God of the Symbolic is, but whether God exists. As he puts it in Seminar XVI. *D'un Autre à l'autre*, "there is no doubt that God is, but that does not prove that he exists", and as he starts to move beyond his concentration on the Symbolic, this is what he sets out to prove by means of his new thinking on feminine *jouissance*, the *jouissance* outside the Symbolic and in the Real.³³ Lacan's first approach to this "Other *jouissance*" is articulated in terms of logic and, in particular, the square of opposition which can be traced back to Aristotle. In his own version of the square, which distinguishes masculine and feminine relations to enjoyment, the two masculine coordinates are Freud's primal father as the logical exception, the "at least one" not subject to the phallic

³⁰ Lacan, *L'angoisse*, p. 97.

³¹ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XIII. The Object of Psychoanalysis 1965-66*. Trans. Cormac Gallagher. Unpublished, seminar X, pp. 7-8; 12; *Book XIV. The Logic of Phantasy 1966-67*, seminar IX, pp. 3-4; *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, p. 173.

³² Lacan, *The Psychoses 1955-1956. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book III*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 288.

³³ Lacan, *The Object of Psychoanalysis*, seminar IX, p. 12; *D'un Autre à l'autre*, p. 343; 103-104.

function ($\exists x.\overline{\Phi x}$), and “all men” who are subject to it ($\forall x.\Phi x$) and have access to only a limited *jouissance*. On the other side of the square, the feminine side, the two coordinates are the Other sex questioning the paternal exception ($\overline{\exists x.\Phi x}$), and women as “not all”, that is, not all subject to the limiting phallic function ($\overline{\forall x.\Phi x}$).³⁴ The relevance of these complicated formulae to the question of God is that Lacan can relate the “infinitude” of the latter, femininity’s not being limited by phallic *jouissance*, to the experience of God outside of the Symbolic domain. In Seminar XIX. . . . *ou pire*, Lacan takes his “at least one”, the paternal exception ($\exists x.\overline{\Phi x}$), to be the God of the Symbolic Other. He grants that this God obviously “is” and has to be taken into account, but the question for the later Lacan, as we have seen, is not whether God is, but whether God exists. Where the God who “is” is situated in the Symbolic Other, the differing relations to *jouissance* between the sexes – articulated in terms of “the One” and “the Other” – allow Lacan to be more precise in making his case for another Other, the Other outside the field of language, namely, the God existing in the Real.³⁵ Back in Seminar VIII, *Transference*, philosophy and theology had been criticised for displacing the numinous, this God in the Real, onto the Symbolic as the “register of the *logos*”.³⁶ But it is only with the advent of his Borromean knot that Lacan can more clearly “write” the existence of the God beyond the Symbolic domain.

The Borromean Knot

From Seminar XIX. . . . *ou pire* (1971-72) onwards, Lacan begins to articulate the interdependence of his three subjective registers in terms of a flattened-out Borromean knot (Figure 1). In this conception of how the human subject is held together, Lacan ties three circles – representing the Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary consistencies – around a hole in the middle and in such a way that if one circle breaks free, the whole structure collapses. Its importance to us is that it enables the later Lacan to “draw” the non-rapport he posits between the sexes, and to make room in his schema for an experience of God within a hole in the Real circle. For Beattie, the Real itself is a “God-shaped void”, the “extra-linguistic Other that constitutes

³⁴ Lacan, *The Knowledge of the Psychoanalyst. Seminar 1971-1972*. Trans. Michael Plastow (Paris: Éditions de l’Association Lacanienne Internationale, 2013), pp. 254-259.

³⁵ Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan. Livre XIX. . . . ou pire 1971-1972*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 2011), p. 36; *Encore*, pp. 66-69.

³⁶ Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan. Livre VIII. Le transfert 1960-1961*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris : Seuil, 2001), p. 58.

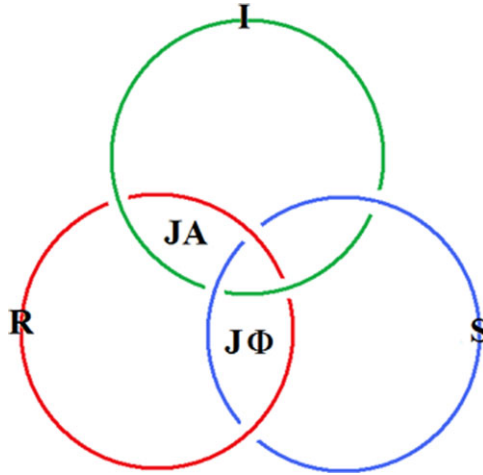


Fig. 1. Lacan's Borromean Knot [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

the formless absence at the heart of language”, as she puts it. But it would be more accurate to speak about the place of Other *jouissance* (JA) as the God-shaped hole in subjectivity. It is there, rather than the Real as such, that Lacan situates the mystical experience of God. And so in Seminar XXII. *RSI*, femininity's not being subject to phallic enjoyment ($J\Phi$), like all men, but having access to this “Other *jouissance*” (JA), and Lacan's locating mystical experience in the same place, let him to demonstrate God as “a third party”, as he once put it, between a man and a woman.³⁷

Of course, since Lacan's new Other is located in the Real, it is not to Moses, as a representative of the Symbolic, that Lacan turns, but the mystics, such as St. Teresa of Avila. Hence Beattie's proposing St. Catherine of Sienna as an Other to Thomas's intellect. Nevertheless, it is not the case that the later Lacan leaves Moses or the Symbolic behind. The Symbolic still has a role to play since Other *jouissance* (JA) is thought by Lacan to be “cornered” into its hole by the Symbolic ring and by what he calls “Symbolic nomination”.³⁸ And if he is still speaking about Moses and Sellin in Seminar XVII. *L'Envers* in 1970, he can refer, as late as 1974, in *RSI*, to Freud's trying “to en-Moses us”.³⁹ In this seminar, as the spoken French title suggests, Lacan develops his own heresy,

³⁷ Beattie, ‘Deforming God’, p. 220; Lacan, *RSI*, p. 25; *Encore*, p. 70.

³⁸ Beattie, *Theology after Postmodernity*, p. 364; Lacan, *RSI*, pp. 24; 178.

³⁹ Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan. Livre XVII. L'envers de la psychanalyse 1969-1970*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1991), pp. 155-161; *RSI*, pp. 38; 179.

hérésie, and questions his own Symbolic dogma. He now recognises that there is not only a Symbolic Name-of-the-Father, but all three rings of his Borromean knot, Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary, are names of the father. Furthermore, there is not only Symbolic nomination now, but Real nomination, and Imaginary nomination as well. However, if Beattie highlights the shift of emphasis in the later Lacan from the Symbolic to the Real, he has not left the Symbolic behind. *RSI* still recognises that the experience of God comprises the totality of the effects of language in the Symbolic Other. And so, it emerges that there are two *loci* for that experience in Lacan. The God of the Symbolic remains, although the case is increasingly made for an access to God in the Real. Nevertheless, Lacan's intention is not to do away with the Symbolic, but to restore the balance of his Borromean knot in such a way that the Symbolic is not the only Other. Hence his recommending a second *tranche* of psychoanalysis to allow the Real and the Imaginary to find their legitimate place in the subject after the Symbolic has dominated the analytic treatment. Likewise, it is for this reason that the later Lacan argues that God “*ek-sists*”.⁴⁰ Where Heidegger had spoken about *Dasein* “*ek-sisting*”, in the sense of standing out from itself and other beings so as to make a clearing for Being,⁴¹ what Lacan means is that the God in the Real stands out. As “*eksistence*” par excellence, God stands outside of the Symbolic as the Other of the Symbolic Other.

Where Lacan had maintained in his so-called Symbolic phase that “there is no Other of the Other”, the later Lacan succeeds in not only finding a place for the existence of a divine Other of the Symbolic Other, but in “writing” the existence of the God who ensures that there cannot be established a rapport between the sexes. If Janet Soskice could once argue that the doctrine of the Trinity tells us nothing about sexual difference, this is not the case for Lacan. He finds his coreligionists incorrigible – amusingly calling them “*in-correligionable*” – in relation to their neglect of the Trinity, and he insists on the importance of threeness, not just for the human subject, but for the idea of God.⁴² The threeness in question, of course, is the bearing that the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary registers have on each other in subjectivity. But Lacan's situating the experience of God outside the Symbolic in the same locus as feminine *jouissance* means that his “Trinity” tells us a lot about sexual difference. It is

⁴⁰ Lacan, *L'insu que sait de l'une-bévue s'aile à mourre. Séminaire 1976-1977* (Paris: Éditions de l'Association Lacanienne Internationale, 2014), pp. 29-30;

⁴¹ William J. Richardson, ‘Heidegger and the Quest of Freedom’, *Theological Studies* 28 (1967), pp. 286-307.

⁴² Janet Martin Soskice, ‘The Trinity and the ‘Feminine Other’’, *New Blackfriars* 75 (1994), pp. 2-17 at p. 16; Lacan, *The Knowledge of the Psychoanalyst*, pp. 86-89; *Le transfert*, p. 69.

masculinity's having access to only phallic *jouissance* limited by the Symbolic ($J\Phi$), and Lacan's associating Other *jouissance* (JA) with the mystical experience of God and locating them both in the hole in the Real, that allow him to place God, as we have seen, between a man and a woman. However, it is questionable that this development in Lacan's thought can be used to support a maternal Trinity. If anything, Lacan regards the doctrine of the triune God as an articulation of the Symbolic relation of Father and Son. He considers it to be based on family kinship in this world, in the Symbolic therefore, not the Real. It is obvious, as Beattie claims, that the later Lacan goes beyond Freud's taking masculine libido as the norm. But in restoring the balance between his registers, he does not leave paternity behind. All three circles are needed to hold his Borromean knot together and, after years of concentrating on the Symbolic "Name of the father", he even comes to recognise all three as names of the father.

Beattie notes that Lacan is keen to accept the Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* because it corresponds to his view that there is an empty *nihil* at the center of the Real. This is true and Lacan will even claim that most of his listeners are creationists, with evolutionism only serving as a defence against that hole in the Real. Emptiness, lack, void, all of these are part and parcel of Lacan's understanding of desire, which only comes about, in his view, once something has been lost when language separates the child from the first object, the mother. But it is one thing to take account of the importance of this "nothing" to Lacan, and another to contend, as Beattie does, that his approach to the Real is nihilist and something to be resisted.⁴³ That is to go too far. Where Beattie speaks about Lacan's Real as a formless absence at the heart of language, the first thing to be recognised is that Lacan is not nihilist in his linguistic theory as such. It is true that he regards the truth as only capable of ever being half-said ("*mit-dit*") due to the hole in the Real and, specifically, the non-rapport between the sexes. But he still believes that the relation in his signifying chain of one signifier to another, rather than a signified, does produce sense. He even finds sense in the locus of Other *jouissance* by playing on the homophonous "*j'ouïssens*" – I hear sense. And even what he calls his "*objet a*", which we put in the hole at the centre of the knot in place of the lost object, while it is an "empty object without a concept", is still a presence, the presence of an absence, although less so than Freud's *Ding*. But, more importantly, while Lacan's Real is empty and does not speak, as in the case of genuine trauma, it can be inhabited.⁴⁴

⁴³ Beattie, 'Deforming God', pp. 218; 220.

⁴⁴ Lacan, 'L'Étourdit', *Autres écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 2001), pp. 449-495 at pp. 454; 493; *Le Sinthome*, p. 83; Dalzell, 'Kant's Nothings and Lacan's Empty Object', *The Letter. Irish*

It can be symbolised to a certain extent by language in hysteria, for example, in as much as the hysterical symptom articulates something of the trauma. And more relevant to us, just as the utterances of the mystics attempt to say something about the Real, not nothing, Lacan would hold that religion as such furnishes a Real that is inhabited. It enables believers to feel at home in the world by civilising the Real with language. Circumscribed by the Symbolic, therefore, and partially inhabited by the Symbolic, thereby enabling sense to be made of it, Lacan's Real might be empty, but his "nihilism" is not as nihilistic as Beattie appears to suggest.

The Later Lacan's Return to Moses

As for Moses, as Lacan's representative of the Symbolic, the fact that he is not forgotten, despite Lacan's later emphasis on the Real, is to be seen in the use in *RSI* of the French neologisms "*enmoïser*" and "*enmoïsement*", which have both Symbolic and Imaginary allusions. Speaking about Freud's atheism, Lacan contends that by not believing in God, Freud was throwing dust in our eyes so as to "en-Moses us".⁴⁵ This "*enmoïsement*", which contains the word "*moi*", means to take oneself as an Ego, a "*moi*", as the first step in childhood on the road to subjectivity. There is an obvious Imaginary dimension there, a reference to the mirror stage mentioned above. But there is also a Symbolic one, as is clear from the word's also containing the French name *Moïse*, Moses. Lacanians usually think about this Symbolic dimension of the mirror stage in terms of what is stated in Seminar X. *Anxiety* about the requirement of an adult, representing the Big Other, to ratify the infant's discovery of itself in the alien image in the mirror.⁴⁶ But the allusion to Moses suggests that there is a Symbolic dimension in the very look of the other that is found there. As Charles Melman, a close associate of Lacan, has suggested, one can find, with some difficulty, the look of one's ancestor there. There is, it can be argued, already a glimpse of Lacan's Symbolic "all-seeing Big Other" in that look. And so the Ego, normally downplayed by Lacanian psychoanalysis in favour of the unconscious subject, has a particular dignity. As in totemism, the ancient system of representing the paternal ancestor, Lacan's mirror-stage indicates that human beings are made not just in the image of the "little other" in the mirror, but the image of God, as Genesis 1:

Journal for Lacanian Psychoanalysis 39 (2008), pp. 97-102 at p. 100; Charles Melman, *Nouvelles études sur l'hystérie* (Toulouse: Éditions érès, 2010), p. 20.

⁴⁵ Lacan, *RSI*, p. 38.

⁴⁶ Lacan, *L'angoisse*, p. 42.

27 teaches. If Freud was trying to “en-Moses” us, it can be said, after Lacan, that it is possible see the look of our ancestor Moses in the look of that other, and not just him, but the primal father before him, on whom Freud’s idea of God is based. If by not believing in God, Freud wanted to en-Moses us, as Lacan argues, Freud was trying to instate the Symbolic function of the father in human subjectivity. And that Lacan could call on Freud’s Moses so late in his seminars (1974) to make this point confirms that his transition to the Real has not done away with either the Symbolic or the father. The later Lacan does not move away from paternity towards maternity, as Beattie suggests, but continues to recognise the need for the paternal function, the Symbolic Name of the Father, to regulate the psyche.

Conclusion

Tina Beattie has done both Thomism and psychoanalysis a service in bringing Lacan and Aquinas into creative dialogue. Her re-reading of Thomas in the light of the later Lacan’s concentration on the Real is exciting in that it offers hope of a renewal in theology beyond traditional categories. But it is one thing to transcend the Aristotelianism of Aquinas in favour of an “incarnate maternal Trinity” and another for Beattie to draw support for her project in Lacan’s supposedly leaving behind Freud’s paternal preoccupations so as to increasingly emphasise a maternal role in the formation of the psyche. The question for the later Lacan is: “what is a woman?”, not “what is a mother?”. It is obvious that the change of emphasis in the later Lacan, his transition to the Real, and his correlating feminine *jouissance* with an experience of God beyond the Symbolic realm, has important implications for a theology which is not just rational but resonates with the deepest desires of human subjectivity. But the later Lacan did not leave the structures of the Symbolic order behind, as is clear from his ongoing recourse to Moses. Lacan’s later concentration on the Other beyond the Symbolic Other is an attempt to restore the balance between the subjective registers in his Borromean knot, not to do away with the Symbolic and its functions. Nor has he left paternity behind, as Beattie suggests, as is apparent not only from his considering the Real to be a name of the father, but his calling again on Moses, as late as Seminar XXII, to instate the function of the father in the psyche. And so there remain in Lacan two *loci* for the experience of God, one in the calculus of signifiers in the Symbolic, and one in the Real, in the God-shaped hole between the Real and the Imaginary. Theology’s attending to both may open up the prospect of saying something new, not only about God, but the burning issues of our time.

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