

MARK MURPHY

St. Mary's University

LACAN AND PNEUMATOLOGY

There has been much work on Lacan in describing his relationship to a Christological theology. We see this in work such as Žižek's *The Fragile Absolute* and also in his dual work with John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ*.¹ We also see a Christological perspective on the value of Lacan's work in Marcus Pound's *Theology, Psychoanalysis and Trauma*.² However, there has generally been less of a focus on the explicitly Pneumatological value of Lacan's work concerning theology. This is obviously discounting Žižek's work on the community of the Holy Spirit and Badiou's *Paul's New moment*.³

The problem is one concerning theoretical focus. An overt focus on pneumatology can sometimes move into what George Lindbeck calls experientialist-expressivist models, whereby the reductive propositional-realism of more traditionalist approaches become replaced with a more universalist-affective approach.⁴ The danger of this approach would be that such an experiential-expressivist model would not correlate at all with Lacan's work, who would arguably attribute such a stance to an erroneous search for meaning, demand and satisfaction.

Usually, therefore, any articulation of the value of the Holy Spirit—regarding Lacan's work—is usually supplemented with an overt Christology to locate it more thoroughly in relation to the Real (as we see in Žižek's work of the community of the Holy Spirit). This essay is an attempt to remedy this gap in research. I explore what Lacan has to say about the role of the Holy Spirit in his conception of psychoanalysis, how he differentiates it from other psychological conceptions, and finally, I reflect on the value this has for theology.

Lacan addresses the relationship between psychoanalysis, the Holy Spirit and death in his seminar on the object-relation. Seminar IV (1956-1957) takes place in a sustained critique of the object-relations theory. It follows his previous seminar on the psychoses, where he introduced the vital term the Name-of-

¹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute*. (London: Verso, 2000).

² Marcus Pound, *Theology Psychoanalysis and Trauma* (London: SCM Press, 2007).

³ Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (California: Stanford University Press, 2003).

⁴ George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Post Liberal Age*. (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1984).

the-Father, which is synonymous with the Master-Signifier.⁵ He differentiates his psychoanalytic practice from the object-relations school by stating that Freud was not interested in an object *per se* but rather the *lack* of an object and its affect on subjectivity.⁶

However, this lack of an object must not be fully identified with *object a*, which appears in later seminars, even if the outlines of the concept are there. It is also in this seminar that he demonstrates the inception of the speaking subject as the child learns to linguistically symbolise through playing games of presence and absence to make sense of the contingency of the mother's presence.⁷ Lacan also further elucidates the structural role of the paternal metaphor (master signifier) in this process.⁸ In this seminar, he also maps out his classical Freudian understanding of the 'Es' as not being associated with some primal drive of the body, but rather to do with the autonomy of the signifier as the unconscious which results from symbolic castration.⁹

Enigmatically, Lacan then goes on to say, in this seminar, that the 'Holy Spirit is the entry of the signifier into the world' and so invariably tied to the death instinct. He states:

The Holy Spirit is the entry of the Signifier into the world, that is very certainly what Freud brought us under the term the death instinct. It is a matter of the limit of what is *signified* which is never attained by any living being, or even, which is never attained at all, except in exceptional cases, probably mythic, since we encounter it only in the [ultimate] texts of a certain philosophical experience.¹⁰

We can assume that the philosophical texts are those of Plato, as he says this earlier: "The Platonic perspective founds all apprehension of the object upon recognition, reminiscence of a type that is in some way preformed. This is separated, by all the distance that there is between modern experience and ancient experience."¹¹

⁵ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar Of Jacques Lacan Book IV: The Object Relation and Freudian Structures 1956-1957*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. L Roche. (London: Unpublished Manuscript, 1994), 428.

⁶ Lacan, 269.

⁷ Lacan, 67-68.

⁸ Lacan, 430.

⁹ Lacan, 45.

¹⁰ Lacan, 44. 'Ce Saint-Esprit dans son ensemble est la venue au monde, l'entrée dans le monde de signifiants. Qu'est-ce que c'est ? C'est très certainement ce que Freud nous apporte sous le terme d'instinct de mort, c'est cette limite du signifié qui n'est jamais atteinte par aucun être vivant, qui n'est même pas atteinte, sauf cas exceptionnel, mythique probablement, puisque nous ne le rencontrons que dans les écrits ultimes d'une certaine expérience philosophique.' (SE, IV: 48). (Unedited *l'Association freudienne internationale* version)

¹¹ Lacan, 7. 'Une perspective platonicienne, celle qui fonde toute appréhension, toute reconnaissance sur la réminiscence d'un type en quelque sorte préformé, à une notion profondément différente, de toute la distance qu'il y a entre l'expérience moderne et l'expérience antique' (SE, IV: 13-14). (Unedited *l'Association freudienne internationale* version)

This mythic experience is in reference to the pleasure principle and its threshold in the register of the ego. He is arguing that the ancient experience is one of demand since it is formed in the register of the imaginary. On the other hand, he argues that Kierkegaard's philosophical perspective represents the modern subject, as it formulates itself via repetition without the experience of satisfaction (SE, IV: 7). The implication is that this limit reveals itself only in the modern subject.

Lacan is saying that this limit – and experience of the modern subject – is synonymous with the Christian conception of the Holy Spirit and the instantiation of the paternal metaphor. The implication seems to suggest that the concept of the Holy Spirit is representative of the subject of modernity. To be a speaking being – as one who is the conjunction of the master signifier and its ensuing secondary signifiers and signifieds – automatically entails the suppression of 'death':

It is nevertheless something which is virtually at the limit of man's reflection on his life, which permits him to glimpse death as the absolute, impassable condition of his existence, as Heidegger expresses it. The relations of man to the signifier as a whole are very precisely tied to this possibility of suppression [...].¹²

The signifier's entry into the body has radically pushed out life (being) and replaced it with its own existence. This is the original trauma or what Lacan calls in this seminar 'Symbolic debt.'¹³ Earlier in 1953, he writes that the symbol is what kills the 'thing' and is what causes the chain of signifiers that creates desire.¹⁴ Hence, all that is spoken 'veils death' as it entails a type of suppression of death as a result of symbolic castration.¹⁵ Part of the reaction to this castration is the formation of symptoms via the imaginary register in its operation to disguise castration. A few lines down Lacan says this:

We shall put what is at the basis of the existence of the signifier [the Holy Spirit], of its presence in the world, into our schema, as the efficacious surface of the signifier in which the latter in some way reflects what one could call the last word of the signified, that is of life, of what is lived, of the flux of emotions [...] This is death, insofar as it is the support, the base, the operation of the Holy Spirit by which the signifier exists.¹⁶

¹² Lacan, 44. '[Ce] de même quelque chose qui virtuellement se trouve à la limite de cette réflexion de l'homme sur sa vie même, qui lui permet d'en entrevoir la mort comme sa limite, comme la condition absolue, indépassable comme s'exprime Heidegger, de son existence. C'est très précisément à cette possibilité de suppression [...] (SE, IV: 48). (Unedited *l'Association freudienne internationale* version)

¹³ Lacan, 33.

¹⁴ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English.*, trans. Bruce Fink. (New York: W W Norton & Company, Inc., 2006), 262.

¹⁵ Lacan, *The Seminar Of Jacques Lacan Book IV: The Object Relation and Freudian Structures 1956-1957*, 47.

¹⁶ Lacan, 44. 'C'est quelque chose que nous allons mettre là, et qui est cette surface efficace du signifiant comme quelque chose où le signifiant reflète en quelque sorte ce qu'on peut appeler le dernier mot du signifié, c'est-à-dire de la vie, du vécu, du flux des émotions [...] C'est la mort qui est le support, la base, l'opération du Saint-

In short, our entire psychic libidinal life is a response to the reality of death, which is mediated by the signifier. Lacan states that the Holy Spirit is the basis of the *operation of the signifier* itself. The Holy Spirit is, thus, not the signified (the spoken) but the complex synchronic and diachronic sliding of the signifier (speech) in its response to an ever-present lack that keeps it in momentum. The first signifier that cuts into the real as death, which, as a limit, is veiled and omnipresent in the subject.

This also seems to suggest that this Spirit's effect in the ego is 'the last word of the signified.' In other words, from the signifier's entry, 'the efficacious surface of the signifier' (the sliding) creates the signified, which in turn is 'the flux of emotions,' as a response to this limit. Thus, the movement of the Spirit, as the operation of the signifier, creates the signified as a response to this limit of death. As an analytic goal, Lacan would want to move the subject to the register of the process of the Spirit, rather than its effects. In other words, to move one from the machinations of the ego to that of the subject: full speech vs empty speech.

In this seminar, Lacan says that symptoms are a knot in the text of the unconscious.¹⁷ Thus, through transference in the analytic process, the symbolic network in which we locate symptoms retroactively alters through a process of deciphering.¹⁸ Alternatively, as Lacan says about the operation of transference, 'something will have happened on the side of the signified. Because of the signifier, the field of the signified will be [...] reorganised.'¹⁹

This shift in the coordinates of subjectivity shakes up past imaginary fixations and allows the subject to speak of these traumatic symptomatic points differently.²⁰ As Lacan articulates more clearly in later teachings, by assuming death – finding ways to come to terms with symbolic castration beyond these fixations – we become desiring beings. Desire takes us beyond life since it takes us beyond the imaginary demands of life.

Why does he reference the Holy Spirit here though? It appears that Lacan in referencing the Spirit is using it as a metaphor to counter-intuitively argue against the notion that the desire has anything to do with an amorphous, essentialist, energetic force that can satisfy us: the aforementioned ancient experience. This is strange as the concept of Spirit, as a metaphorical device, would undoubtedly create associations with some primordial, pre-harmonious energy, as we see in the writings of Jung and others.

The APA psychological dictionary notes that Freud was famous for coming up with his hydraulics theory of libido, which posits that a desirative energy is pushed around the mind and body much like a hydraulic factory.

Esprit par laquelle le signifiant existe' (SE, IV : 48). (Unedited *l'Association freudienne internationale* version)

¹⁷ Lacan, 465. At this stage, 1957, Lacan sees the symptom on the side of the symbolic which entails that it is a type of knot in the unconscious in the analysand. In later years, he locates it more on the side of the real.

¹⁸ Lacan, 466.

¹⁹ Lacan, 356–57.

²⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 2009), 58.

However, we see this model also in the writings of Descartes, who posited that the nerves were like tubes in the body which directed 'animal spirit.'²¹ Freud obviously had no theological interpretation of this, unlike Jung. For the latter, The Holy Spirit was a metaphor for this mysterious psychological force, beyond language, that worked to unite disparate aspects of the psyche.

Jung was influenced by Joachim of Fiora, who perceived the Holy Spirit as a grand unifier of history. Joachim believed that history followed a triadic structure: first there was the age of the Father, then of the Son and finally the age of the Spirit, which would take place after Joachim's death. Jung interpreted the Holy Spirit in terms of psychological meta-linguistic individuation that entails a return of a conception of the self which transcends that of the 'I.'²² Lacan counters such teleological, energetic conceptions by arguing that the entry of the Spirit creates complexity much like 'a hydroelectric factory.'²³

The implication is to differentiate the hydroelectric factory metaphor from that of Freud's hydraulic theory. Lacan argues that the crucial difference is in the very functioning of the factory. By using the hydroelectric factory as a metaphor, Lacan puts the focus on the machine *as the process of desire*. In other words – and as we know from other seminars – Lacan emphasises the complex movement and functioning of desire firmly relating to the complexity of the signifier. Thus, it would be wrong to associate the concept of the Spirit to any sort of ancient harmonic experience related to 'wholeness'. Instead, the conception of the Holy Spirit is a reference to the shift from the ego of demand, to the modern subject of desire.

Later in the text, Lacan says that the fool says in his heart there is no God because it is only at the level of affect that he can articulate this independence in the operation of the imaginary – as in order to speak it, at the level of the spoken, implies the existence of that which you are trying to refute: the Other.²⁴ The emotional register of the ego is what allows one to imagine independent wholeness from the signifier and the operation of the Holy Spirit – emotional affects will enable us to believe that we are independent. However, to speak means that the symbolic activity of the Spirit is always operative in the very sliding of the signifier. Thus, we are still dependent on the work of the Spirit (as God), which is caught up with death.²⁵

Lacan's exposition on the significance of the Holy Spirit offers an essential resource for theologians and philosophers of religion who may feel that the Holy Spirit has been overly psychologised as the emotional-affective element of religious practice. We can see this in interpretation in writers such as Von

²¹ 'Hydraulic Model', *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, accessed 7 November 2019, <https://dictionary.apa.org/hydraulic-model>.

²² Larry Gates, 'Jung's Conception of the Holy Ghost', *Journal of Religion and Health* 33, no. 4 (1994): 313–19.

²³ Lacan, *The Seminar Of Jacques Lacan Book IV: The Object Relation and Freudian Structures 1956-1957*, 47.

²⁴ Lacan, 430.

²⁵ Lacan, 430.

Hügel and others.²⁶ In our disenchanted, a-theological world, there is a tendency to rely on the affective aspects of our psyche to interpret the movements of the Spirit. With the shutting down of a participatory world of analogy, and with the birth of the self-limiting analytic subject, we can ultimately give too much ground to conceptions of the Holy Spirit which elide the lived, participatory, dynamic narrative expression of the community.

In other words, modern pneumatology is at risk of aiming behind a given narrative in favor of a liberal universalist, energetic, affective substance leading us to the supposed 'whole.' In Lacanian terminology, this would be placing the signified over the signifier; the imaginary over the symbolic. It would reject that the narrative—or the participatory movement of narrative—is the very movement of the Spirit. Instead, it posits that the Spirit is the ready-made affective signified, which our speech necessarily leads to.

On the contrary, Lacan's concept of the subject is born from constant narrative fragmentation rather than unification. Arguably, for Lacan, it can be said that the value of the Holy Spirit, insofar as it is associated with the sliding signifier and the real, was found in constantly hitting the subject with this traumatic limit—in its own contingency as a linguistically castrated subject. It is important to remember that for Lacan, our transcendental categories of perception are contingent on our interpolation into the field of language—how subjectivity is (mal)formed with the entry of the signifier into the world.

Changing subjective positions to ease symptoms involves antagonising these complex transcendental categories through a continual repositioning of the traumatic real concerning the signifier. This perspective places the radical nature of Lacan's work on the Holy Spirit in giving it a proper place regarding language as constant traumatic reinvention, which breaks us free of imaginary pretense. This perspective of the Holy Spirit as being related to the very movement of language and its effects on subjectivity and community is also reflected by Augustine who, reflecting on Peter on Pentecost, says:

And then that Spirit, pervading him thus with the fullness of richer grace, kindled his hitherto frigid heart to such a witness-bearing for Christ, and unlocked those lips that in their previous tremor had suppressed the truth, that, when all on whom the Holy Spirit had descended were speaking in the tongues of all nations to the crowds of Jews collected around, he alone broke forth before the others in the promptitude of his testimony in behalf of the Christ, and confounded His murderers with the account of His resurrection.

And if anyone would enjoy the pleasure of gazing on a sight so charming in its holiness, let him read the Acts of the Apostles: and there let him be filled with amazement at the preaching of the blessed Peter, over whose denial of his Master he had just been mourning; there let him behold that tongue, itself translated from diffidence to confidence, from bondage to liberty, converting to the

²⁶ Ellen M. Leonard, *Creative Tension: The Spiritual Legacy of Friedrich Von Hügel* (University of Scranton Press, 1997).

confession of Christ the tongues of so many of His enemies, not one of which he could bear when lapsing himself into denial.²⁷

Although Augustine was obviously writing from a pre-modern perspective, here we see that it is possible to (mis)read Augustine as rejecting any kind of reduction of the Spirit to an ineffable essentialist energetics. Instead, he associates the Spirit with the metanoiac, dynamic, transformative movement of speech itself. Like Lacan, Augustine would see the value of the Spirit in the ability to keep on speaking beyond epistemological and linguistic demarcations.²⁸

Even in the story of Pentecost, the Spirit appears as tongues of flame – there is no description of altered internal states. Taken in literalist terms, this would be the absurd notion that the Spirit gives us a strange, mystical flaming partial-object we can ‘experience’ and somehow all possess. However, as a metaphorical device, it is clearly a representation of the very function of the Spirit in transforming our speech: the Spirit is the autonomous functioning of speech in its transformation of the subject.

A popular quote, (erroneously traced back to Teilhard De Chardin) says ‘we are not humans seeking a spiritual experience, we are spiritual beings having a human experience.’ The problem here is the assumption that an unalloyed ‘human experience’ is somehow made accessible to us. All ‘experience’ is formed and mediated by language, and Lacan teaches us that language – the thing which makes us human – is ultimately made obscure to us in the last instance, since this medium can never fully mediate itself. As an instance of the obscurity of language, the parapraxis resembles glossolalia, where we babble and slip on things dark and unknown to us.

Thus, not only is God – as a transcendent spiritual experience – apophatically precluded from us, we are also excluded an experience of ourselves in the always and already transcendent movements of language. This is the unconscious: in the end, it speaks, and we do not speak it. Moreover, if we give it space to speak (according to Lacan and Augustine respectively), it will transform us.

²⁷ Augustine, *St. Augustine on St. John: Tractates, Homilies and Sermons on St. John's Gospel and First Epistle*, ed. Matt McCune, 2009, 431.

²⁸ Catherine Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* (Columbia University Press, 2014).