

Lacan's Endgame: Philosophy, Science, and Religion in the Final Seminars

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Abstract: In this intervention, I argue for drawing a sharp distinction between the late Lacan and the final Lacan. Specifically, I defend a reading of Lacan's twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth seminars (*L'insu que sait de l'une-bévue, s'aile à mourre* [1976-1977] and *Le moment de conclure* [1977-1978]) according to which this very last Lacan self-critically abandons much of what he pursued during the later period of his teaching from the 1960s through the mid-1970s. In particular, I contend that, starting in 1976, Lacan puts an end to the reign of the *mathème*, namely, the pursuit of an analysis purged of meaning through mathematical-style formalizations bearing upon a senseless Real. He does so motivated by a combination of methodological/pedagogical and ontological/metaphysical reasons. As I see it, the final Lacan opts instead for an anti-reductive treatment of *sens* avowedly inspired by Marxian materialism. The meanings of Imaginary-Symbolic reality arise from, but thereafter become relatively autonomous in relation to, a meaningless Real that itself in turn comes to be affected and perturbed by these same meanings. My reconstruction of the final Lacan undermines narratives suggesting an uninterrupted continuity in the later Lacan's trajectory from the start of the 1960s right up until his death in 1981. Moreover, I show how and why Lacan, in his last years, significantly reconfigures the interrelations he posits between psychoanalysis, philosophy, science, and religion.

Keywords: Lacan, *Seminar XXIV*, *Seminar XXV*, Philosophy, Science, Religion, *Mathème*, Materialism

§1 A Conclusive Materialism: Awakening from the Formalist Dream

Jacques-Alain Miller contends that Jacques Lacan's *Seminar* actually ends in 1978, just under three years prior to his death. This contention surfaces during a 2007 session of Miller's annual course given in the 2006-2007 academic year. The March 2006 Champ freudien edition of *Seminar XVI (D'un Autre à l'autre* [1968-1969]) still lists *La topologie et le temps* as *Seminar XXVI* (1978-1979). But, the October 2006 edition of *Seminar XVIII (D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant* [1971]) deletes it from the list of seminars. The evidence suggests that, sometime between March and October 2006, Miller decided to strip *Topology and Time* of its status as the final installment of *le Séminaire*.

Miller's 2006 decision goes against those who count as belonging to Lacan's *Seminar* not only the meetings of 1978-1979, but also the declarations surrounding the "dissolution" of l'École freudienne de Paris at the start of the 1980s. By Miller's reckoning, the twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth seminars (*L'insu que sait de l'une-bévue, s'aile à mourre* [1976-1977] and *Le moment de conclure* [1977-1978]) should be counted

as Lacan's last two strictly speaking.¹ Arguably, the very title of *Seminar XXV, Time to Conclude*, signals as much.²

Without pronouncing for or against Miller's cutting off of *le Séminaire* with the twenty-fifth, I would wager that anyone who scrutinizes the sessions of *La topologie et le temps* will find precious little of substance or clarity. These sessions' title and a handful of brief suggestive moments (ones I have dealt with elsewhere³) are all that an exhausted Lacan, largely silent and often ceding the floor to younger others, leaves his audience.⁴ Counting in Miller's favor, *Seminars XXIV* and *XXV* contain, by comparison, more sustained lines of serious and followable reflection on Lacan's part. During the two academic years of 1976-1977 and 1977-1978, Lacan indeed attempts to bring his intellectual journey to a close by retrospectively taking stock of the fundamental axioms and big-picture implications of his version of psychoanalysis.

Yet, there is no consensus even amongst Lacanians about the importance, or lack thereof, of his final seminars. Some are skeptical or dismissive of his topologically-inflected discourse of the mid-to-late 1970s. Alain Lemosof depicts Lacan, starting in *Seminar XXIV*, as old, tired, and desperate to address before dying doctrinal and practical problems generated within the École freudienne.⁵ Even Miller himself admits as much.⁶ Nonetheless, Lemosof still finds many things of value in his parsing of the twenty-fourth seminar itself (as does Miller in his seminar on *The Very Last Lacan* of 1976-1978). By contrast, Marcelle Marini, in her summaries of *Seminars XXIV* and *XXV*, finds little of worth. She writes of "the repetition of by-now hackneyed themes"⁷ and sees "Nothing... really new"⁸ in these final years of *le Séminaire*. Similarly, Élisabeth Roudinesco, in her 1993 biography of Lacan, somewhat derisively refers to this last stretch of Lacan's trajectory as time lost on "planet Borromeo."⁹

I do not share the more negative assessments of the twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth *Seminars* specifically. I hope that my intervention on this occasion will show, among other things, that there in fact is much that

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1 Miller 2006-2007, session of May 2, 2007.

2 Dorgeuille 1981, p. 18; Miller 2006-2007, session of May 2, 2007.

3 Johnston 2005, pp. 47-57.

4 Dorgeuille 1981, p. 18; Marini 1992, p. 136.

5 Lemosof 2005a, pp. 397-398.

6 Miller 2006-2007, session of May 9, 2007.

7 Marini 1992, p. 246.

8 Ibid., p. 247.

9 Roudinesco 1997, pp. 366-367, 377, 379, 397, 416, 435.

is important and novel in this very late period of Lacan's meditations. Nevertheless, I by no means intend to elevate the concluding moments of *le Séminaire* to forming the definitive "final words" on the entirety of the Lacanian corpus. I would be loathe to encourage a ridiculous chronological fetishism according to which what a thinker thinks last is somehow more true, revealing, profound, or decisive in relation to preceding periods of his/her thought. What comes at the end is not automatically somehow or other superior to what came before. This is as much the case with Lacan as with other figures.

What interests me most about *Seminars XXIV* and *XXV*, what I find most striking in them, is Lacan's repositioning therein of the four fields of psychoanalysis, philosophy, science, and religion with respect to one another. These two academic years contain some surprises—even, and perhaps especially, for those who believe themselves already to know how Lacan configures these four spheres in a set constellation based on acquaintance with Lacan's more familiar and famous texts from the first half of the 1970s. Moreover, even just within and between the twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth seminars, Lacan vacillates, rapidly changing his mind on certain key points.

Two well-known features of the later era of Lacan's teachings are revisited by Lacan between 1976 and 1978 in ways pivotal for me in the present context: first, his flirtations with historical and dialectical materialism; and, second, his statements regarding philosophy and so-called "anti-philosophy." Along with various others, I have addressed these two features in previous work. I take myself to have demonstrated on these prior occasions both: one, that Lacan does not categorically repudiate any and all philosophy despite the two instances of him describing himself as an "anti-philosopher"¹⁰; as well as, two, that Lacan, particularly starting in the mid-1960s, evinces commitments to a Marxism-indebted materialism as a philosophical position.¹¹ I will assume these demonstrations to be adequate as I move forward into a treatment of Lacan's final seminars.

During the twenty-fourth seminar, Lacan twice avows at least dabbling in philosophy.¹² One of these times, he admits that, "I do not believe myself to do philosophy, but one always does it more than one believes."¹³ Then, in the twenty-fifth seminar, he describes himself as moving with the current of "the philosophy of Freud."¹⁴ Immediately on

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10 Johnston 2014, pp. 248-273.

11 Ibid., pp. 65-107.

12 Lacan 1976-1977, sessions of January 11, 1977, February 8, 1977.

13 Ibid., session of January 11, 1977.

14 Lacan 1977-1978, session of December 20, 1977; Balmès 2004, p. 68.

the heels of this description, Lacan presents his labors concerning “the stuff which constitutes thought” (*l'étoffe qui constitue la pensée*) as “nothing other than to say things in exactly the same fashion” as Karl Marx *qua* historical materialist.¹⁵ Lacan's self-presentation dovetails with earlier sincere admissions by him of strong sympathies towards Marx's materialism¹⁶ (for instance, in *Seminars XVI*¹⁷ and *XVIII*¹⁸—Lemosof notes several continuities between the eighteenth and twenty-fourth seminars,¹⁹ to which I would add that of the endorsement of Marxian materialism).

Lacan situates his late speculations about a Real unconscious composed of the material signifiers (or “letters”) of *lalangue* and *jouis-sens*—these speculations remain central in *Seminars XXIV* and *XXV*²⁰—under the banner of historical materialism. In the same gesture, Lacan, insofar as he identifies Marx's theoretical framework as itself a philosophy of sorts, also places his (along with Sigmund Freud's) form of psychoanalysis at least partly within the discipline of philosophy. The philosophy against which Lacan occasionally rebels as an “anti-philosopher” arguably does not include Marx's materialism starting in 1845.²¹

Herein, I will defend the claim that the final Lacan, at least between 1976 and 1978, brings his teaching to a close with a hitherto-underappreciated radical repositioning of psychoanalysis *vis-à-vis* philosophy, science, and religion. The radicality of this shift is particularly palpable against the immediately preceding background of the pursuit of analytic scientificity during the 1960s and early 1970s. This pursuit, inspired and guided by a combination of French neo-rationalist epistemology and anti-humanist structuralism, is oriented by the paradigm of the “matheme,” by the drive towards mathematical-style formalization.

Such formalization seeks, among other aims, to render Lacanian doctrine thoroughly transmissible (*à la* the ancient Greek sense of *ta mathēmata*²²) by screening out the distorting interferences of quotidian

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15 Lacan 1977-1978, session of December 20, 1977.

16 Birman 2013, pp. 98-99, 103.

17 Lacan 2006e, pp. 279-293.

18 Lacan 2006f, p. 28.

19 Lemosof 2005a, p. 411.

20 Lacan 1976-1977, sessions of December 14, 1976, January 11, 1977; Lacan 1977-1978, session of April 11, 1978; Lemosof 2005a, pp. 395, 416; Vandermersch 2005a, p. 427.

21 Lacan 1980, p. 17; Landman 2013, p. 27.

22 Lacan 2018, pp. 17, 126; Lacan 1971-1972, session of May 4, 1972; Lacan 1990a, p. 38; Lacan 1978, p. 54.

meanings bringing with them spontaneous, often-implicit worldviews, philosophies, and religions. Indeed, meaning (*sens*) itself *tout court* is portrayed by the later Lacan of the 1960s and early 1970s as nothing but interference, as a veil covering over the meaningless Real of an unconscious (in)consisting of nonsensical fragments of *lalangue*.²³ This Lacan reprimands both philosophy and religion for misattributing meaning (along with unity and direction) to the senseless contingencies of the *Ur-Real* of being *qua* being.²⁴

Yet, even at the height of the reign of the paradigm of the matheme, Lacan has doubts about this formalist program. His reservations, which eventually win out over mathematicism in *Seminars XXIV* and *XXV*, already are on display in *Seminar XX: Encore* (1972-1973). In the May 8, 1973 session of that seminar, Lacan remarks apropos meaningless and, hence, fully transmissible mathemes that, “Nevertheless, they are not transmitted without the help of language (*langage*), and that's what makes the whole thing shaky.”²⁵ Near the beginning of the following week's session (on May 15, 1973), he reiterates this concern:

Mathematical formalization is our goal (*but*), our ideal. Why? Because it alone is matheme, in other words, it alone is capable of being integrally transmitted... Therein lies the objection: no formalization of language (*la langue*) is transmissible without the use of language itself (*la langue elle-même*).²⁶

In-between these two expressions of hesitation about mathemes, Lacan concludes the session of May 8, 1973 by stating that, “The analytic thing (*Le truc analytique*) will not be mathematical. That is why the discourse of analysis differs from scientific discourse.”²⁷

The final Lacan of the twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth seminars ultimately judges his formalism to be shaken to pieces by precisely these doubts voiced in *Encore* (doubts reinforced by other considerations I will address subsequently). The combined syntax of the Symbolic (as *le langage*) and semantics of the Imaginary (as *la langue*), a combination constituting the reality of meaning, cannot be entirely set aside in favor of a strictly isolated Real (as *lalangue*) that is beyond, behind, or beneath all meaning and that can be transmitted in its purity via mathemes as

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23 Lacan 1977-1978, session of November 15, 1977.

24 Lacan 1998, pp. 30-31; Lacan 1973-1974, session of May 21, 1974; Lacan 1978, pp. 44-45; Lacan 1975b, p. 202; Lacan 1990b, p. 130; Johnston 2014, pp. 248-273.

25 Lacan 1975d, p. 100; Lacan 1998, p. 110.

26 Lacan 1975d, p. 108; Lacan 1998, p. 119.

27 Lacan 1975d, p. 105; Lacan 1998, p. 117.

senseless pure signifiers without any accompanying significance. Even if the later Lacan fairly can be characterized as wholly obsessed with a formalized science of a meaningless Real, the final Lacan cannot be so characterized.²⁸

When all is said and done, the final Lacan denies psychoanalysis the possibility of being scientific (insofar as scientificity is equated, as per Alexandre Koyré and company, with Galilean-style mathematization²⁹). He correspondingly appears to resign himself to the inevitability of ineliminable philosophical and religious residues within both the theory and practice of analysis. However, I will contend that this Lacan's manner of repositioning the Freudian field with respect to the triad of science, philosophy, and religion is consistent with the permutations of Marxian materialism informing Lacan's periodic endorsements of this theoretical orientation. The manners of reworking the infrastructure-superstructure and nature-society distinctions on the parts of certain twentieth-century Marxists can be seen to be reflected in moves made by Lacan in *Seminars XXIV* and *XXV*. In particular, his handlings during these two academic years of the relations and interactions between a meaningless Real and meaningful reality exhibit isomorphisms with anti-reductive variants of historical and dialectical materialism in the Marxist tradition.

Early on in the second session (December 14, 1976) of the twenty-fourth seminar, Lacan goes so far as to maintain that materialism is the only honest position.³⁰ He alleges that, "Everything that is not founded on matter is a fraud (*une escroquerie*)."³¹ Lacan promptly punctuates this point with another of his neologisms: "*matériel-ne-ment*," matter does not lie (as roughly homophonous with "materially" [*matériellement*]).³² He identifies the Real preoccupying him at this late juncture in his thought as equivalent to matter.³³ As seen above, this matter would be material signifiers as composing the *jouissance*-saturated *lalangue* of the Real unconscious of the *parlêtre*.³⁴

Lacan's endorsements of historical/dialectical materialism during the late 1960s and early 1970s are in the proximate background of this December 14, 1976 session of *Seminar XXIV*. And, as I noted earlier, he later overtly embraces Marx's historical materialism in the twenty-

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28 Landman 2013, pp. 27-28.

29 Balmès 2004, pp. 62-63.

30 Miller 2006-2007, sessions of March 7, 2007, May 16, 2007.

31 Lacan 1976-1977, session of December 14, 1976.

32 Ibid.

33 Lacan 1976-1977, session of January 11, 1977; Lacan 1976b, pp. 38, 40-41.

34 Lacan 1977-1978, session of January 10, 1978; Lemosof 2005a, pp. 406-407; Lacan 1975b, pp. 193-194.

fifth seminar. What is more, Lacan, just a few paragraphs after this 1976 affirmation of materialism as the one true stance, invokes the distinction between use-value and exchange-value,³⁵ thus further signaling that the materialism he has in mind is specifically Marxist in nature.

If I am correct about the role of Marxian materialism in the last installments of *le Séminaire*, this has critical implications especially for understandings of the trajectory of Lacan's thinking based on certain fashions of periodizing his work. I have various reservations about the too-neat-and-clean segmenting of this trajectory into stages in which each of the three categories of Lacanian register theory is granted pride of place, with there purportedly being the three phases of the primacy of the Imaginary (1930s-1940s), Symbolic (1950s), and Real (1960s-1981).³⁶ However, Alain Badiou's³⁷ and Miller's now-entrenched differentiation between the Lacan of the Symbolic (i.e., of the 1950s Saussurian "return to Freud") and the Lacan of the Real (who first comes forward at the very end of the 1950s in *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* [1959-1960]) is not without its virtues and utility.

Nonetheless, reading and appreciating the Lacan of 1976-1978 as a Marxian materialist of a certain sort presents a challenge to the still-prevailing picture of the late Lacan of the Real. This picture tends to treat the entire period of Lacan's career from the 1960s until his death as dominated by the agenda to reduce away all meaning (*sens*) from analysis in favor of a formalized Real disclosed via mathematical-style senseless signifiers. But, one of my core theses in this present contribution is that the final Lacan of *Seminars XXIV* and *XXV* is to be sharply distinguished from the late Lacan of the 1960s and early-to-mid 1970s. This final Lacan abandons the late Lacan's formalist mathematicism and, in so doing, re-admits sense (and, with it, Imaginary-Symbolic reality in general³⁸) as an irreducible dimension of psychoanalytic experience. The twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth seminars display a still little-known Lacan on the other side of peak formalism.

§2 Making Real Progress: Psychoanalysis Against Science

In both *Seminars XXIV* and *XXV*, Lacan utterly and unambiguously renounces the possibility of rendering psychoanalysis scientific. For the final Lacan, analysis definitely is not, and cannot become, a science.³⁹ Instead, as the title given to the individually-published opening session

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35 Lacan 1976-1977, session of December 14, 1976.

36 Miller 2006-2007, session of May 9, 2007.

37 Badiou 2009, pp.132-133.

38 Miller 2006-2007, session of March 28, 2007.

39 Lacan 1976-1977, sessions of January 5, 1977, January 11, 1977; Lacan 1981, p. 6; Balmès 2004, pp. 58, 67; Miller 2006-2007, session of May 9, 2007.

of the twenty-fifth seminar has it, analysis is, rather, “a babbling practice” (*une pratique de bavardage*).⁴⁰ Already in 1975, Lacan concedes that, although structural linguistics allegedly permits analysis to remain in contact with the scientific (as per his program of Freud *avec* Saussure going back to the 1950s), analysis is a “practice” rather than a science proper.⁴¹

With the program of the *matheme* in the immediate background of these two seminars of 1976-1977 and 1977-1978, Lacan’s renunciation of the very possibility of analytic scientificity is especially conspicuous, even jarring.⁴² In 1975, for instance, he is still willing to state that psychoanalysis and “scientific discourse” share the “same nature.”⁴³ Moreover, not only is the final Lacan’s decoupling of psychoanalysis and science a break with his teachings of the mid-1960s through the mid-1970s—this closing gesture at the end of his life is tantamount to a recantation of a career-long pursuit going back to the 1930s. Indeed, the paradigm of the *matheme* hardly emerges out of thin air in the intellectual itinerary of the Lacan of the 1960s. The 1938 notion of the “complex” and the recourses to game-theoretic models in the 1940s already foreshadow much later efforts at neo-rationalist-style formalization.⁴⁴ And, of course, the classic, middle-period Lacan’s appropriations of Saussurean structuralism during the 1950s, inspired particularly by Claude Lévi-Strauss’s 1949 *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, involve formalist ambitions. Obviously, the neologism “*matheme*” refers to the Lévi-Straussian “*mytheme*,”⁴⁵ in addition to the Greek “*ta mathēmata*.”

Lacan, in his final seminars, does not rest content merely with abandoning the quest for scientific status. He engages in an analytic critique of science itself, of the very concept or ideal of scientificity. Insofar as this critique, like the doctrine of the *matheme* it rejects, has deep roots in Lacan’s protracted prior labors, I would maintain that it is not simply a case of sour grapes on his part.

In *Seminar XXIV*, Lacan asserts that science depends upon the idea of God.⁴⁶ This assertion too, taken on its own, is nothing new. From Lacan’s earliest seminars onwards, he draws attention again and again to the covert, underlying reliance on the notion of a certain divine-like

40 Lacan 1977-1978, session of November 15, 1977; Lacan 1981, p. 7; Vandermersch 2005a, p. 421.

41 Lacan 1976c, p. 53.

42 Balmès 2004, p. 52.

43 Lacan 1975a.

44 Lacan 2001a, pp. 27-30; Lacan 2001b, pp. 85-99; Lacan 2006b, pp. 161-175.

45 Lévi-Strauss 1963, pp. 210-211; Lacan 1971-1972, session of February 3, 1972; Lacan 2007a, p. 103; Lacan 1975b, pp. 180-181; Evans 1996, p. 108; Roudinesco and Plon 2011, pp. 977-978.

46 Lacan 1976-1977, session of May 17, 1977.

guarantee of universal law and order by the apparently secular natural sciences of modernity. Lacan usually makes this point with reference to the role of God as guaranteeing the knowability of reality in classical Cartesian metaphysics.

However, in the twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth seminars, the sciences’ surreptitious dependence on a presupposed God seems to be turned into an overt liability by Lacan. In *Seminar XXV*, he declares that, “science itself is nothing but a fantasy and... the idea of an awakening is properly speaking unthinkable.”⁴⁷ The “awakening” (*réveil*) in question on this occasion would be an entrance into the realm of a knowably organized and self-consistent Real beyond Imaginary-Symbolic reality’s veil of appearances. But, such a Beyond is, for this very last Lacan, the Cartesian deity as nothing more than a fantasmatic mirage immanently arising out of Imaginary-Symbolic reality itself.

A couple of sessions later in the twenty-fifth seminar, Lacan returns to this line of science-skeptical argumentation.⁴⁸ In both these sessions of *Seminar XXV* (November 15 and December 20, 1977), formal as well as empirical sciences are identified as tethered to a certain “fantasmatic core” (*noyau fantasmatique*).⁴⁹ Geometry, an avatar of scientificity for thinkers from Plato through at least Immanuel Kant, is said to be “woven of fantasies”⁵⁰ (with traditional, Euclidean geometry being devoted to exploring, in Lacan’s eyes, idealizations abstracted from the register of the Imaginary and its forms of embodiment⁵¹). Likewise, Lacan, at this same moment, denies the existence of a “world of mathematics” (*monde des mathématiques*).⁵² Insofar as, one, the formal languages of mathematics constitute a symbolic order; and, two, such orders are inconsistent, conflict-ridden barred big Others (according to a long-standing Lacanian thesis Lacan continues to hold at the conclusion of his itinerary⁵³): The proliferating diversity of mathematical systems and sub-systems cannot be anchored or contained by any single, unifying foundation or framework (i.e., a unique, all-encompassing “world”). Relatedly, during the 1978-1979 academic year, topology, the by-then last remaining bastion of Lacanian formalist mathematicism, is declared by Lacan to be Imaginary, metaphorical, and even “an abuse of

47 Lacan 1977-1978, session of November 15, 1977.

48 Ibid., session of December 20, 1977.

49 Ibid., session of December 20, 1977.

50 Ibid., session of December 20, 1977.

51 Lacan 1973-1974, session of January 15, 1974; Lacan 1974-1975, session of February 18, 1975; Lacan 2016, p. 18; Lacan 1981, p. 6.

52 Miller 2006-2007, session of May 16, 2007.

53 Lacan 1976-1977, session of January 11, 1977.

metaphor.”⁵⁴ In a 1978 talk, he downgrades his mathematical rendition of the unconscious to being “nothing but a presentation.”⁵⁵

As for empirical sciences, the November 15, 1977 session of the twenty-fifth seminar contains a passing swipe at biology and evolutionary theory. As I examine and criticize on a previous occasion, Lacan, going back to his earlier recourse to structuralism, prohibits phylogenetic inquiries into human prehistory for a shifting mixture of epistemological, ontological, clinical, and metapsychological reasons.⁵⁶ Dovetailing with this long-standing prohibition of his, the Lacan of *Seminar XXV*, somewhat scandalously, places creationist and evolutionary narratives on the same level, both being said by him to be mere “hypotheses.”⁵⁷ Both the fervent Christian fundamentalist and the hard-nosed Darwinian naturalist purportedly are equally constrained to do nothing more than confabulate about the origins of humanity.

Similarly, in a March 8, 1977 session of the twenty-fourth seminar, Lacan subtly echoes his better-known claims from the seventh seminar according to which the apparently theistic notion of creation *ex nihilo* is actually essential to any and every atheism.⁵⁸ In *Seminar XXIV*, he contends that a theory of spontaneous generation at odds with a doctrine of evolution as uninterrupted development over time (i.e., a divine-like “great chain of being”) goes against the posited existence of God, permits getting rid of an overarching creative Power or Substance.⁵⁹ Perhaps the hypothesis (or maybe fantasy) of abrupt, discontinuous emergences out of nothing is preferable, at least for a psychoanalytic atheist, to that of the gradual, continuous flowerings of a unified *natura naturans*.

In *Seminar XXV*, promptly after characterizing science, including the formal sciences of mathematics, as entangled with fantasies, Lacan puts forward a now-familiar thesis: “Science is related especially to what one calls ‘death drive.’”⁶⁰ The standard interpretation of this statement is that, like the *Todestrieb*, the sciences, in their relentless pursuits of their goals, disregard human concerns regarding happiness, gratification, well-being,

54 Lacan 1978-1979, sessions of November 21, 1978, December 19, 1978, January 9, 1979; Vandermersch 2005b, p. 437.

55 Lacan 1984, p. 3.

56 Johnston 2013, pp. 59-77.

57 Lacan 1977-1978, session of November 15, 1977.

58 Lacan 1992, pp. 213-214, 260-261.

59 Lacan 1976-1977, session of March 8, 1977.

60 Lacan 1977-1978, session of December 20, 1977.

and so on.⁶¹ The categorical imperative of the sciences, a Sadean-style mirroring inversion of the Kantian one, is “You must because you can!” Even if a proposed particle physics experiment in a super-collider brings with it a statistically non-negligible risk of accidentally creating a black hole that would devour the earth almost instantaneously, the experiment has to be run for the sake of science, in the name of yet-more knowledge, consequences be damned.⁶² For this sort of reason, Lacan considers scientists to be “crazy” (*fou*).⁶³ Something similar is suggested in an anonymous report in the journal *Scilicet* on biologist Jacques Monod’s 1967 inaugural lecture at the Collège de France.⁶⁴

Indeed, when Lacan equates science with death drive on December 20, 1977, he represents life as indifferent to science. Distinguishing between scientific *savoir* and technological *savoir faire*, he indicates that the former has an impact on people only insofar as it manifests itself partially and through a glass darkly in the guise of the latter.⁶⁵ On this occasion, he uses television, with its screen for the projection of fantasies, as an example of technology *qua* a distorted reflection of science⁶⁶ (with television as a “lathouse” as per *Seminar XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* [1969-1970], a techno-gadget toy incarnating the function of *objet petit a*⁶⁷).

Furthermore, as Lacan here puts it, “It’s a fact that life continues thanks to the fact of reproduction related to fantasy.”⁶⁸ Subjects’ bodies perpetuate the species *homo sapiens* as a biological side-effect of a more-than-natural sexuality organized by non-natural fantasmatic schemas and formations unconcerned with the organic phenomena of concern to the life sciences. Psychoanalysis, as distinct from science, has things to say about denaturalized somas and psyches.

However, to return to the link between science and the *Todestrieb*, there is another aspect to this connection that its established interpretation misses. When Lacan makes this connection, he also simultaneously portrays science as “futile.”⁶⁹ To condense quite a bit from both Freud and Lacan, all drives (*Triebe*) are instances of the death

61 Miller 1999, p. 89.

62 Lacan 1974.

63 Ibid.

64 Anonymous 1968, p. 191.

65 Lacan 1977-1978, session of December 20, 1977.

66 Lacan 1975b, pp. 202-203.

67 Lacan 2007b, p. 162.

68 Lacan 1977-1978, session of December 20, 1977.

69 Ibid.

drive in that they are compelled to repeat, as their goal, failing to reach their supposed aims. The *Todestrieb* has to do with futility as well as with indifference to human pleasure, satisfaction, and the like. In line with this, Lacan here seems to be hinting that the sciences perseverate to no end.

Lacan's depiction of scientific futility in *Seminar XXV* should be construed as resonating with remarks to be found in *Seminar XXIV*. In the twenty-fourth seminar, Lacan denies that science makes progress. Instead, the sciences turn in circles. Like both the shape of the torus and the incessant rotation of deathly drives around an impossible Real,⁷⁰ scientific theories and practices orbit around impasses, repeating a basic pattern of movement.⁷¹ Likewise, in the same session of *Seminar XXIV* (December 14, 1976), Lacan reiterates his long-standing opposition to the very notion of the progressive,⁷² rubbishing the idea of human progress writ large.⁷³

I strongly suspect that this anti-progressivism apropos the sciences is Lacan's translation of a Bachelardian philosophy of science, a philosophy he knew directly and also indirectly absorbed further through the influence of both Louis Althusser as well as Althusser's young students (including, of course, Miller). Additionally, although Lacan makes no mention of Thomas Kuhn, there are resonances with Kuhn's 1962 classic *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. What a Lacanian might add regarding Kuhn's title is that "revolution" in the celestial sense is at least as appropriate a meaning here as "revolution" in the political sense.⁷⁴ In a Hegelian-style convergence of opposites, "revolution" can signify simultaneously both the repetition of the old (i.e., one more turn around the same set path) and the rupture of the new (i.e., the overturning of established order).

However, another session of the twenty-fourth seminar, that of March 8, 1977, implies that psychoanalysis, and perhaps even a science disabused of its theosophical (and unconscious-fantasmatic) presuppositions about being *qua* being, actually might be able to make some progress in terms of grasping a fragmentary, disharmonious Real. In *Seminar XXIV*, Lacan, redeploying a couple of neologisms from 1972's "*L'étourdit*,"⁷⁵ speaks of being (*être*) sowing itself (*s'emblaver*,

70 Lacan 2016, pp. 105-106.

71 Lacan 1976-1977, session of December 14, 1976.

72 Lacan 1988b, pp. 24, 79, 86, 326; Lacan 1993, p. 243; Lacan 1992, pp. 208-209; Lacan 1964-1965, session of April 7, 1965; Lacan 2006e, pp. 173-174; Lacan 2007b, p. 106; Lacan 1973-1974, session of March 12, 1974; Lacan 2016, pp. 105-106.

73 Lacan 1976-1977, session of December 14, 1976.

74 Lacan 2006e, p. 238; Lacan 2007b, p. 55; Lacan 1978, p. 47.

75 Lacan 2001d, pp. 467, 488, 491.

s'ensemencer) as the phenomenal emblem (i.e., appearance, avatar, representation, etc.) of itself—this is what the neologistic reflexive verb "*s'emblant*" conveys—so as to become "*parêtre*."⁷⁶ The latter neologism receives further clarification on the heels of "*L'étourdit*" in the January 16, 1973 session of *Seminar XX*:

What we must get used to is substituting the 'para-being' (*par-être*)—the being 'para,' being beside—for the being that would take flight (*cet être qui fuirait*). I say the 'para-being' (*par-être*), and not the appearing' (*paraître*), as the phenomenon has always been called—that beyond which there is supposedly that thing, the noumenon. The latter has, in effect, led us, led us to all sorts of opacifications that can be referred to precisely as obscurantism... We should learn to conjugate that appropriately: I par-am, you par-are, he par-is, we par-are, and so on and so forth.⁷⁷

As Bruce Fink helpfully remarks in one of his translator's footnotes, "*Fuir* (to take flight) also means 'to leak.'"⁷⁸ Hence, "the being that would take flight" indicates, in another instance of a Hegelian-type coincidence of opposites, that being *qua* being withdraws itself while, at the same time, oozing out in the guise of its phenomenal manifestations. This likely also is an intended gesture in the direction of Heideggerian Being as simultaneously concealing and revealing itself.

Furthermore, Lacan here, however consciously or not, echoes post-Kantian German idealist critiques of Kant's thing-in-itself (*Ding an sich*). In particular, his remarks on this occasion in the twentieth seminar reverberate with G.W.F. Hegel's discussion of "*appearance qua appearance*" from the chapter on "Force and the Understanding" in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.⁷⁹ Lacan, like Hegel before him, proposes that there is nothing but the immanence of the lone plane of disparate, unsynchronized appearances—with this plane internally generating fantasies of an elusive substantial transcendence, an Other that would synthesize and unify a merely apparent disorder ("beyond... there is supposedly that thing, the noumenon"). In line with both Hegelianism and materialism, Lacan condemns such fantasies as opacifying "obscurantism." Instead, being, in all its possible "conjugations," is (in) essentially *par-être* (para-being). As such, being is nothing but its own

76 Lacan 1976-1977, session of March 8, 1977.

77 Lacan 1975d, p. 44; Lacan 1998, pp. 44-45.

78 Lacan 1998, p. 44.

79 Hegel 1977b, p. 89; Johnston 2018b, pp. 25-28.

paraître (appearing), its own “semblance” (à la “*s’embler*”).⁸⁰ Or, in the Kantian terms also employed by Lacan, noumena are nothing other than residues immanently secreted by phenomena insofar as the latter are traversed by splits and antagonisms. In short, being is always beside itself (“the being ‘*para*,’ being beside”).

Returning to the March 8, 1977 session of *Seminar XXIV*, Lacan glosses his register of the Real therein right on the heels of redeploing his talk of “*s’embler*” and “*parêtre*.” He characterizes the Real as an incoherent structure.⁸¹ As such, it lacks unity while nevertheless not being an amorphous blob or ineffable negativity (or, as Hegel would put it, a “formless lump”⁸²). This Real minimally coheres to “constitute... a universe” solely in and through reality, namely, the two other registers of the Imaginary and the Symbolic.⁸³ In the roughly contemporaneous “*La troisième*,” Lacan emphasizes the Real’s fragmentation into disparate ensembles.⁸⁴ On its own, the Real forms no universe *qua* world, being an “*immonde*” instead.⁸⁵ This same Lacan, in a move that would be pleasing to Slavoj Žižek, appeals to quantum mechanics in divorcing the Real from the world (*qua* a comprehensible, coherent reality co-constituted by the registers of the Imaginary and the Symbolic).⁸⁶

As seen, *Seminars XXIV* and *XXV* continue to link the Real with the matter of a certain materialism. Furthermore, and in line with Lacan’s just-mentioned 1974 reference to quantum physics, the material Real of the final Lacan also gets associated with nature. I already have done much work on Lacan’s heavily-qualified naturalism, including that to be found in the last years of his teaching.⁸⁷ I will not repeat these labors in the present context.

Suffice it on this occasion to note the two sides of Lacan’s reflections on nature in the twenty-fourth seminar. On the one hand, as Lacan articulates it on April 19, 1977, “Nature... is an excessively vague notion. Counter-nature is in truth much clearer than the natural.”⁸⁸ The natural sciences, prior to a psychoanalytic-style traversal of fantasies

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80 Lacan 1975b, p. 182.

81 Lacan 1976-1977, session of March 8, 1977.

82 Hegel 1977a, pp. 76-77.

83 Lacan 1976-1977, session of March 8, 1977; Lemosof 2005a, p. 417.

84 Lacan 1975b, p. 184.

85 Lacan 1975b, pp. 184, 198; Lacan 1975a.

86 Lacan 1975b, p. 184.

87 Johnston 2008, pp. 271-273; Johnston 2013, pp. 13-58; Johnston 2014, pp. 83-85, 99; Johnston 2018a, pp. 75-77; Johnston 2020.

88 Lacan 1976-1977, session of April 19, 1977.

about Nature-with-a-capital-N as a self-consistent One-All, take for granted and are steered by a hazy, under-examined vision of an omnipervasive wholeness or totality. Analysis, by contrast, deals with “*anti-phusis*” as incarnated by humans *qua* denaturalized speaking beings, creatures of “*contre-nature*”⁸⁹ (with Lacan pointing to the super-ego⁹⁰ and the neuroses,⁹¹ both central to the analytic clinic, as examples of anti/counter-nature).

By Lacan’s lights, the denaturalized is evidently much less fuzzy in its exceptional status *vis-à-vis* the natural than the vast swathes of everything pre- and non-human in existence. In this, analysis has an advantage over the natural sciences. This will remain so at least unless and until the sciences, by including analysis and its subjects within naturalism as a truly fundamental ontology, register that the barring of the big Other applies to the natural Real as well as the non-natural Symbolic.

On the other hand of the final Lacan’s two-sided reflections on nature, in the May 17, 1977 session of *Seminar XXIV*, he remarks, citing Edgar Morin on “the nature of nature,”⁹² that, “nature is not so natural as all that.”⁹³ This same remark is to be found in, among other prior places, the twenty-first seminar.⁹⁴ When Lacan says this, he is thinking of a (natural) science with an accompanying naturalism that includes within itself psychoanalysis. The nature at the base of an exhaustively universal naturalist metaphysics, with its materialist immanentism, would have to be such as to generate out of and contain within itself counter-nature. In other words, this would have to be a *phusis* giving birth to *anti-phusis*, with the latter remaining within but becoming irreducible to the former as a self-denaturalizing nature. As Lorenzo Chiesa convincingly argues, the later Lacan’s account of sexual difference as Real sexuation *circa* the early 1970s epitomizes the issues involved in his quasi-naturalist materialism.⁹⁵

This Lacanian variant of dialectical materialism asks and answers the question: What must nature be so as to eventuate in the distinctively dysfunctional entities that are the sexed human subjects of psychoanalysis? So long as the natural sciences fail to confront such queries, a gulf will persist between science and psychoanalysis.

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89 Lacan 2006c, p. 461; Lacan 2006d, p. 514; Lacan 1975c, p. 171; Lacan 1988a, p. 149.

90 Lacan 1976-1977, session of February 8, 1977.

91 Lacan 1977-1978, session of November 15, 1977.

92 Morin 1977, pp. 17-19, 27.

93 Lacan 1976-1977, session of May 17, 1977.

94 Lacan 1973-1974, session of May 21, 1974.

95 Chiesa 2016, pp. 27, 37, 89-90; Lacan 1976-1977, session of February 15, 1977.

But, if and when the sciences come to suspect that their nature is, to repeat Lacan, “not so natural as all that,” then the rapport between the analytic and the scientific can and should be reconsidered, perhaps quite dramatically.

§3 Away from a New Signifier: Lies and Jokes, Intended and Unintended

As I highlighted earlier, there are doubts that lead the later Lacan to his eventual final abandonment of the program of the matheme as a failure.⁹⁶ I focused attention on vacillations apropos the agenda of formalization to be found in *Seminar XX*. Therein, as seen, Lacan indicates that the pure, meaningless signifiers of the formal language of mathemes require for transmission via teaching accompanying explanations couched in the impure, meaningful signs of natural language. This amounts to a methodological/pedagogical obstacle to the pursuit of mathematicist formalization.

However, the final Lacan folds on formalization not only due to considerations related to method and pedagogy. Perhaps more importantly, he comes to realize that there are foundational ontological/metaphysical issues problematizing the paradigm of mathematicism. For this very last Lacan, not only is *sens* irreducible—it bleeds into the senseless Real, becoming a non-epiphenomenal factor incapable of quarantining within an entirely separate Imaginary-Symbolic reality. It seems as though, at the conclusion of his teaching and life, Lacan belatedly heeds the warnings about mathemes uttered by his long-time follower and colleague Serge Leclaire. In Leclaire’s eyes, “the psychoanalytic act is an ‘affair of speech’ (*parole*), and in relation to this speech, the mathemes, important though they might be, are best seen as ‘graffiti.’ They are traces, testimonies, but still *written* expressions of an essentially *verbal* act of rage or passion or pain or pleasure.”⁹⁷

For the later, but not the final, Lacan, meaning marks a border partitioning, on one side, philosophy and religion from, on the other side, psychoanalysis and science. Whereas philosophy and religion idealistically ascribe an essential meaningfulness to being in and of itself, psychoanalysis and science materialistically confront the rock-bottom meaninglessness of the incarnate Real. Yet, in the twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth seminars, the tetrad of psychoanalysis, science, philosophy, and religion gets significantly reconfigured. For ontological/metaphysical as well as methodological/pedagogical reasons, the analytic and the scientific diverge. Analysis continues to intermingle with philosophy (or, at a minimum, certain philosophies). With sense as

96 Balmès 2004, p. 63.

97Turkle 1981, p. 182; Chemama 1981, pp. 110-111; Dorgeuille 1981, p. 163.

irreducible for analysis, its distinctiveness *vis-à-vis* both the philosophical and the religious is cast into doubt. The place of psychoanalysis amongst human concerns is, in *Seminars XXIV* and *XXV*, put back into serious question, to say the least.

What does Lacan’s sweeping re-interrogation of the position of analysis in 1976-1978 actually look like in terms of its devilish details? In the March 8, 1977 session of the twenty-fourth seminar, Lacan posits that there can be no *parlêtre* without a psychical being, no speaking without thinking.⁹⁸ That is to say, insofar as the unconscious is a speaking being, there is an ineliminable intentionality, hence meaning, involved with this being. A few moments later in this same seminar session, Lacan avers:

In effect, uncorking the idea that there is only the Real that excludes all species of sense (*sens*) is exactly the contrary of our practice, because our practice swims in the idea that not only names, but simply words (*les mots*), have a purport. I do not see how to explain that. If the *nomina* do not hold onto things (*choses*) in whatever fashion, how is psychoanalysis possible? Psychoanalysis would be in a certain fashion a sham, I mean a semblance (*du semblant*).⁹⁹

In Lacan’s contemporaneous lecture in Brussels, he states something similar:

The Real is at the opposite extreme of our practice. It’s an idea, a limit-idea of that which does not make sense (*une idée limite de ce qui n’a pas de sens*). Sense is that by which we operate in our practice: interpretation. The Real is this vanishing point as the object of science (and not of the knowledge that is more than criticizable), the Real is the object of science.¹⁰⁰

Shortly after this, in the same lecture, he adds—“the unconscious has a body only of words.”¹⁰¹ *Seminar XXV* likewise depicts the word as the material embodiment of the idea.¹⁰² In conjunction with the immediately preceding, this would seem to entail that speech’s words are the vehicles for thought’s ideas, whether the latter be the contents of unconscious/primary-process or conscious/secondary-process mentation.

98 Lacan 1976-1977, session of March 8, 1977.

99 Ibid.

100 Lacan 1981, p. 5.

101 Ibid., p. 6.

102 Lacan 1977-1978, session of November 15, 1977.

At the very start of the twenty-fifth seminar, Lacan, although repudiating the identification of psychoanalysis with science, insists that analysis nonetheless must be taken seriously. Just because *la pratique de bavardage* is not scientific per se does not mean that it is frivolous, unimportant, and without weight. Saying indeed has consequences.¹⁰³ Babbled words are not epiphenomenal despite their causal powers not being (fully) included hitherto within the explanatory jurisdictions of the empirical, experimental sciences of nature.

Yet, in *Seminar XXIV*, Lacan famously speaks of moving “towards a new signifier.”¹⁰⁴ This would be something entirely apart from meaning, a pure senselessness. However, as even Miller himself admits, Lacan’s hoped-for new signifier does not arrive.¹⁰⁵ Why not? Why does the final Lacan, despite continuing to gesture in the direction of forms purged of all *sens*, conclude that such purging is not possible, perhaps also not desirable?¹⁰⁶

In Miller’s 2006-2007 seminar on *The Very Last Lacan*, he observes that the final Lacan acknowledges the impossibility of a total and complete exclusion of meaning from the Real.¹⁰⁷ Miller muses about a sense that would not be a semblance (in an echo of the title of the eighteenth seminar) and would rejoin the Real.¹⁰⁸ By contrast, I do not think, as regards the topic of *sens* in the final seminars, that the issue for Lacan is one of finding a non-dissembling meaning that, as non-dissembling, is fit for reconnecting with a Real from which meaning normally is divorced.

Instead, I believe that the final Lacan alights upon a dialectical materialist portrayal of the interrelations between the meaningless Real (with its material signifiers of *lalangue, jouis-sens*, etc.) and the meanings of Imaginary-Symbolic reality. Like various permutations of dialectical materialism within the Marxist tradition, Lacan’s too takes its lead from anti-reductive, non-economistic versions of the complex multiplicity of back-and-forth influences between infrastructures and superstructures as per historical materialism (recall that, as late as *Seminar XXV*, Lacan affirms his proximity to Marx’s historical materialism). In particular, the positioning and interactions between the senseless Real and the senses of reality are, for the final Lacan, analogous to those between

103 Lacan 1977-1978, session of November 15, 1977; Balmès 2004, pp. 51-52; Vandermersch 2005a, p. 421; Lemosof 2005b, p. 444; Miller 2006-2007, session of May 2, 2007.

104 Lacan 1976-1977, session of May 17, 1977.

105 Miller 2006-2007, session of March 14, 2007; Vandermersch 2005a, p. 422.

106 Lemosof 2005a, pp. 414-415.

107 Miller 2006-2007, session of March 21, 2007.

108 Ibid.

infrastructure and superstructure respectively. How so?

Two types of example readily illustrate Lacan’s Marxism-inspired restructuring of his register theory and its treatment of *sens*. The first is used by Lacan himself. In the twenty-fourth seminar, he refers several times to lying. Of course, there are ordinary lies as instances of false statements intended to mislead. This quotidian understanding of lying relies upon a distinction between false and true utterances.

But, the final Lacan wishes to entertain the idea that all meaningful statements, as instances of Imaginary-Symbolic reality in general, are, in a certain manner, lies.¹⁰⁹ He goes so far as to depict reality apart from the Real as a tissue of dreams, falsehoods, fantasies, fictions, illusions, semblances, and the like. As he puts it in the February 15, 1977 session of *Seminar XXIV*, “The Symbolic... says nothing but lies when it speaks; and it speaks a lot.”¹¹⁰ Similarly, in the opening session of *Seminar XXV*, Lacan comments that, “The unconscious is precisely the hypothesis that one does not dream only when one sleeps.”¹¹¹ In other words, waking reality, co-constituted through the registers of the Imaginary and the Symbolic, is no more Real than a dream.

Yet, lies, whether as a sub-set of the symbolic order or as this order *überhaupt*, are not mere epiphenomena. Any and every lie obviously involves meaning. Lies are not senseless. Rather, they obviously are animated by an intention to deceive that itself depends upon communicating (misleading) meaning in order to achieve the intended deception.

A lie, in its falsity, refers to a non-existent state of affairs. If the lie fulfills its purpose, this non-existent state of affairs, as the virtual reality of a (dis)semblance, nonetheless affects existent things. Arguably, this is what Lacan is getting at when, in *Seminar XXIV*, he portrays lies as phenomena in which the Symbolic gets included in the Real.¹¹² Or, to paraphrase a couple of Lacan’s earlier formulations anticipating this process of the becoming-Real of the Symbolic, lies are examples of the Symbolic having “formative effects”¹¹³ on the Real or of the Symbolic “falling into”¹¹⁴ the Real.¹¹⁵

Lacan also brings up Freudian *Verneinung* in connection with

109 Lemosof 2005a, p. 408.

110 Lacan 1976-1977, session of February 15, 1977.

111 Lacan 1977-1978, session of November 15, 1977.

112 Lacan 1976-1977, sessions of February 15, 1977, March 15, 1977.

113 Lacan 2006a, p. 77.

114 Lacan 1993, pp. 258-270.

115 Johnston 2014, pp. 65-107.

lying.¹¹⁶ As per Freud's foundational 1925 account of this mechanism, certain unconscious truths can be uttered only if they are negated by conscious speech¹¹⁷—with the negation of a truth being a lie, something false. This leads Lacan to an inversion of his notion of lying in the guise of truth: Freudian *Verneinung* amounts to telling the truth in the guise of lying.¹¹⁸

Finally, the Lacan of the twenty-fourth seminar insists that falsities are not always lies.¹¹⁹ I take this to mean two things. First, and apropos instances of the mechanism of negation specifically, the person uttering an instance of *Verneinung* does not lie insofar as he/she does not consciously intend to deceive. He/she states something false as a conscious negation of an unconscious truth. But, this falsification is not an act of lying. It is, instead, a revealed truth couched in the guise of a falsehood. Or, as Lacan phrases this in his 1976 “Preface to the English-Language Edition” of *Seminar XI (The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* [1964]), “There is no truth that, in passing through awareness (*J'attention*), does not lie.”¹²⁰

Second, and more generally, Lacan's differentiation of falsities from lies is an implicit reminder of an absolutely fundamental feature of Freudian psychoanalysis. Starting with Freud's 1897 revision of his seduction theory announced in his correspondence with Wilhelm Fliess,¹²¹ a psychical reality essentially, primordially indifferent to correctness, *qua* truth corresponding to states of affairs in external reality, comes to the fore and into its own. For the Freudian psyche, fantasies, fictions, and so on, as “false,” can be just as, if not sometimes more, significant than anything “true” *qua* factual, objective, and the like. Even if these semblances of the psyche's virtual reality are falsities measured by certain standards of veracity, they definitely are not lies as mere untruths devoid of real weight. Indeed, Lacan, in his preface to the English translation of the eleventh seminar, equates the “psych-” of psychoanalysis with “fiction,” indicating that analysis really is about such unreality.¹²² In a 1974 interview, he similarly confesses that, “For me, the only true, serious science to follow is science fiction.”¹²³

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116 Lacan 1976-1977, session of February 15, 1977; Lemosof 2005a, p. 408.

117 *SE* 19: 233-239.

118 Lacan 1976-1977, sessions of January 5, 1977, March 15, 1977.

119 *Ibid.*, session of February 15, 1977.

120 Lacan 2001e, p. 571; Lacan 1977, p. vii.

121 *SE* 1: 259-260.

122 Lacan 1977, p. vii.

123 Lacan 1974.

Another category of example by which to illustrate the final Lacan's anti-reductive recasting of the place of *sens* in his framework is that of jokes. The Lacan of 1976-1978 does not have sustained recourse to jokes in the same way he does to lies. However, in *Seminar XXIV*, Lacan voices his dislike for Freud's second topography¹²⁴ (i.e., the “structural model” favored by his primarily Anglo-American psychoanalytic enemies, especially the ego psychologists). By direct implication, he prefers the Freud of the first topography—particularly the early Freud of the first years of the twentieth century. This Freud, to whom Lacan never stops returning, is the author of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901), and *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905). This third early-Freudian masterpiece of 1905 indeed contains material helpful for appreciating the final Lacan's reworking of his register theory as regards the topic of meaning.

Freud's study of jokes and other forms of humor contains some of the clearest sources of inspiration for the Lacanian doctrine of the materiality of the signifier, including such interrelated concepts as *lalangue*, letters, and *jouis-sens*. In particular, the wordplay of jokes exemplifies, for Freud, the primary-process thinking characteristic of the unconscious in its distinctiveness *vis-à-vis* secondary-process conscious cognition. Such play puts to work and echoes the primary process disregard for the strictures of logic, reason, syntax, semantics, and considerations of social communicability and intersubjectively recognizable significance.¹²⁵ In *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud describes a sort of *jouis-non-sens*, namely, what he labels a “pleasure in nonsense” (*Lust am Unsinn*)¹²⁶ in which “the nonsense in a joke is an end in itself” (*der Unsinn im Witz Selbstzweck ist*).¹²⁷ This wallowing in the idiotic enjoyment of the meaningless material side of language, with its acoustic, graphic, sonorous, rhythmic, etc. features, becomes central for Lacan, up to and including the final Lacan.

Given my present purposes, there is a passage in Freud's *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* that warrants examination here. At one point in this 1905 book, Freud observes:

...jokes do not, like dreams, create compromises; they do not evade the inhibition, but they insist on maintaining play with words or with nonsense unaltered. They restrict (*beschränkt*) themselves, however, to a choice of occasions in which this play or this nonsense can at the same time appear allowable

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124 Lacan 1976-1977, session of January 11, 1977; Lacan 1986, pp. 83-84.

125 *SE* 8: 125-126.

126 *GW* 6: 141, 195, 200; *SE* 8: 126, 171, 176.

127 *GW* 6: 200; *SE* 8: 176.

(in jests [*Scherz*]) or sensible (in jokes [*Witz*]), thanks to the ambiguity of words and the multiplicity of conceptual relations (*Denkrelationen*). Nothing distinguishes jokes more clearly from all other psychical structures than this double-sidedness and this duplicity (*seine Doppelseitigkeit und Doppelzüngigkeit*) in speech. From this point of view at least the authorities come closest to an understanding of the nature of jokes when they lay stress on 'sense in nonsense' (*Sinnes im Unsinn*).¹²⁸

The final Lacan, in his Marx-inspired materialist revamping of his register-theoretic handling of sense, tacitly circumnavigates back to this particular Freud. Herein, Freud's analytic account of humor is appropriately as "double-sided" as the jokes for which he is accounting. On the one side, humorous phenomena ultimately originate from an ontogenetically primary proto-linguistic field of nonsense (in Lacanian terms, from the Real of the meaningless material signifiers of *lalangue* with its *jouis-sens*). Humor is a sublimation in which repressed *Unsinn* returns.

On the other side, these same humorous phenomena, as fully arisen, cannot straightforwardly be collapsed down into their ontogenetic origins. In other words, the sublimation is (at least partially) irreducible to what it sublimates. As Freud stresses, jokes are "sense in nonsense," rather than pure and simple nonsense. It is no accident that very young children are incapable of pulling off proper jokes. In their under-development, they lack mastery of "the ambiguity of words and the multiplicity of conceptual relations (*Denkrelationen*)" necessary for achieving specific varieties of humor. Without such cognitively, linguistically, and socially sophisticated artifices as exquisite comic timing, sensitivity to cultural context, and extremely clever exploitation of the ideational and associative polyvalence of words and thoughts, successful instances of the comedic are not possible.

All of these instances involve, in Lacan's terms, the meaningful socio-symbolic signs and recognitions of Imaginary-Symbolic reality. Jokes and the like violate the rules of this reality. But, they do so through determinate negations and immanent transgressions, rather than via wholesale cancellations (i.e., indeterminate negations) and absolute ruptures (i.e., transcendent transgressions). Without this reality, there are no jokes. In Lacanian parlance, there can be the Real of the *jouis-sens* of *lalangue* for the symbolically castrated speaking subject only in and through the reality of the *plaisir* of *la langue*. The same could be said of the literary *à la* the James Joyce dear to the Lacan of *Seminar XXIII* and accompanying texts.

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¹²⁸ GW 6: 196-197; SE 8: 172.

I believe that the final Lacan appreciates the larger point implicit in the Freud I have just now spent some time unpacking. For this Lacan, the meanings, lies, and jokes of reality—this also holds for the very field of *sens tout court* co-constituted by the Imaginary and the Symbolic as itself one giant lie or joke—continually impact and merge with the Real. In a 1978 lecture, Lacan portrays the Symbolic unconscious as impressing itself upon and shaping the Real.¹²⁹ As seen, the final Lacan goes so far as to claim that, without words holding onto things (as signifiers falling into signifieds), there can be no psychoanalysis whatsoever.

Hence, although Lacan remains steadfast to the bitter end in maintaining the fundamental senselessness of the *Ur-Real* of (material) being in its brute ultimate contingency and opacity, this Real, however narrowly or shallowly, is marked and remarked by the significations of Imaginary-Symbolic reality. The latter therefore are species of the Marxian genus of "real abstractions"¹³⁰ (or what Žižek and Alenka Zupančič baptize "the Real of an illusion"¹³¹). Just as Marx's real abstractions sometimes involve the downward causation of superstructures reacting back on their underlying infrastructures, so too do senses of Lacan's reality react back on his Real.

Thus, the final Lacan signals his conversion to something along the lines of the adamantly anti-reductive materialism of the Marxist tradition. In line with this, the problem with the later Lacan's mathemes—this is perhaps a problem even for the final Lacan himself—is not that they are a joke (as various critics of Lacan's formalisms have it, up to and including Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont). If anything, they are not enough like jokes as per the Freudian theory of humor.

Admittedly, *Seminars XXIV* and *XXV* contain multiple moments in which Lacan takes his distance from Freud.¹³² He admits that his topological explorations are not to be found in the Freudian corpus.¹³³ Freud's conceptions of the unconscious, the endogenous, and analytic scientificity all are called into question in these final years of *le Séminaire*.¹³⁴ It might seem as though, just before he dies, Lacan looks to take a last step beyond Freud himself.

Yet, despite certain isolated disagreements with Freud, the final Lacan remains fundamentally faithful to the founder of psychoanalysis.

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¹²⁹ Lacan 1984, p. 3-4.

¹³⁰ Marx 1975, p. 161; Marx 1973, pp. 85, 88, 100-102, 104-105, 142-146, 157, 164, 331, 449-450, 831-832; Marx 1976, pp. 739, 909; Marx 1978, p. 185; Marx 1981, pp. 275, 596-597, 603.

¹³¹ Žižek 2012, pp. 721-722; Zupančič 2001, pp. 141-142; Zupančič 2008, p. 17.

¹³² Lacan 1986, pp. 82-84.

¹³³ Lacan 1981, p. 7.

¹³⁴ Lacan 1976-1977, session of November 16, 1976; Lacan 1987, p. 32; Lacan 1986, pp. 82-84.

On my interpretation of the twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth seminars, he carries out one last return to Freud by reinstalling a dialectical interplay between reality and the Real, sense and senselessness, as well as the natural and the more-than-natural. Furthermore, Lacan, near the end of his life, publicly reaffirms his unwavering fidelity to the father of analysis in the course of a speech given in Caracas and addressed to an assembled group of his disciples—"It is up to you to be Lacanians, if you wish. Me, I am Freudian."¹³⁵ One could say that Lacan perseveres in his Freudianism to his very last breath.

§4 Being Severe Towards the Persevering Father: Better to Curse the Darkness

As late as a 1974 interview in Rome (entitled "Freud Forever"), Lacan persists in associating psychoanalysis with science and correspondingly dissociating it from both philosophy and religion.¹³⁶ The analytic and the scientific formalistically treat a meaningless material Real.¹³⁷ The philosophical and the religious mistake meaningful Imaginary-Symbolic reality for the Real of ultimate being. This is the constellating of the tetrad of psychoanalysis, science, philosophy, and religion characteristic of the late Lacan. But, the final Lacan rearranges this constellation.

In this same 1974 interview, Lacan describes stubbornly-persisting religion as a "devouring monster."¹³⁸ By the latter half of *Seminar XXV*, and consistent with lines of reflection running throughout his last seminars, he appears to perceive this monster as so all-devouring as to swallow up both science and psychoanalysis too. In the session of April 11, 1978, he wonders aloud whether all human beings, Freud himself included, inevitably fall into the clutches of religiosity one way or another.¹³⁹ Implicitly referring to Freud's hypothesis that the unconscious is ignorant of mortality due to its ignorance of both time and negation,¹⁴⁰ the Lacan of *Seminar XXIV* claims that, "it is necessary to make an effort not to believe one is immortal."¹⁴¹ With the immortality of the soul being a belief epitomizing a type of religious faith, Lacan's claim indicates the existence of a powerful default tendency towards religiosity. Of course,

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135 Lacan 1986, p. 82.

136 Lacan 1974.

137 Lacan 1976a, p. 26.

138 Lacan 1974.

139 Lacan 1977-1978, session of April 11, 1978; Vandermersch 2005a, p. 429.

140 *SE* 14: 289, 296-297.

141 Lacan 1976-1977, session of January 5, 1977.

by this point, Lacan already has warned of "the triumph of religion"¹⁴² and asserted the inevitability of "the God hypothesis"¹⁴³ for all speaking beings.

Taking into consideration everything that I have laid out thus far in reconstructing the twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth seminars, it would seem that, for the final Lacan's version of psychoanalysis, science is unattainable, with philosophy and religion being unavoidable. What is worse, even the meaning-dissolving mathemes succumb to the impulse of religiosity, as Lemosof, among others, observes.¹⁴⁴ This Lacan is himself concerned about modern science degenerating into a new religious obscurantism.¹⁴⁵ Ironically, his own formalisms gave rise to, and continue to support, pockets of (pseudo-)Lacanian mysticisms of the matheme, contemporary parodies of Pythagorean mystery cults. Another, parallel irony is that the late Lacan's mathematicism, pushed to extremes, becomes just as reductive as the most reductive scientific naturalisms opposed by partisans of this same mathematicism. Evidence indicates that Lacan shuts down l'École freudienne de Paris in part so as to disrupt these tendencies amongst his own adherents.

Lemosof, writing about the dissolution of l'École freudienne, states, "Lacan considers that the psychoanalyst, if not becoming religious, should assume and support the misunderstanding that *cannot be dispelled*."¹⁴⁶ In the parlance of *Seminar XXIII*, one could say that religiosity's hypothetical deity is the *sinthome* of the *parlêtre* as such. And, in *Seminar XXV*, Lacan muses that clinical analysis makes some progress, however little, by revealing how and why the speaking analysand has his/her defining characteristic *sinthome*.¹⁴⁷

In the twenty-third seminar, Lacan stipulates that a *sinthome* is a symptom upon which the very being of its subjective bearer depends.¹⁴⁸ Were the subject to be "cured" of his/her *sinthome*, he/she would cease to exist, would dissipate along with this *point de capiton* of his/her subjectivity itself. Hence, the therapeutic gain brought about by analysis, according to the Lacan of the twenty-fifth seminar, hinges not on eliminating the *sinthome*, but on making it transition from being an "in itself" to a "for itself" (to resort to a bit of Hegelese not foreign to Lacan). In so doing, the subject goes from being unconsciously in the grip of his/

.....
142 Lacan 2013, p. 64.

143 Lacan 1998, p. 45.

144 Lemosof 2005b, p. 442.

145 Lacan 1974.

146 Lemosof 2005b, p. 443.

147 Lacan 1977-1978, session of January 10, 1978.

148 Lacan 2016, pp. 11, 13, 30, 41-42, 77.

her *sinthome* to having a margin of conscious distance from it, after the achievement of which he/she may even come to identify with it (or at least be comfortable enough living with it). This might be as much self-transparent freedom and contentment as analysis can afford.

Similarly, apropos invincible religion's triumphant God hypothesis as the *sinthome* of socio-symbolic subjectivity, perhaps there is no "cure" for religiosity. Maybe the irreducible meanings enshrined in both religion and philosophy are indeed incurable. However, if this sort of *sens* is handled as a *sinthome*, then although an immediate, first-order atheism might not be possible for speaking subjects, a mediated, second-order one is a potential option. Both desire *à la* Lacan¹⁴⁹ and belief too are inherently self-reflexive. Hence, one can come not to desire one's desire for the divine, not to believe in one's (first-order) belief. A second-order atheism therefore would be attainable despite the impossibility of a first-order one. This would be a position somewhat akin to the Kantian doctrine of transcendental illusion.

The same might also hold for Lacan's "insurgence" against philosophy. Putting together some of his above-cited remarks, Lacanian anti-philosophy could be described as a second-order rebellion against unavoidable first-order philosophizing. One cannot help but lapse into philosophical indulgences. But, one also can struggle against these lapses. As an anti-philosopher, Lacan might be redescribed as an uncomfortable and reluctant philosopher. Analogously, as an atheist, Lacan perhaps is an unsettled, discontent Catholic.

Lacan's January 5, 1980 "Letter of Dissolution" is worth revisiting in light of the preceding. At the end of his teaching, at the end of his School, and near the end of his life, he declares:

...my École would be an Institution, the effect of a consolidated group, at the expense of the discursive effect (*l'effet de discours*) expected from an experiment, when it is Freudian. One knows what price was paid for Freud's having permitted the psychoanalytic group to win out over discourse, becoming a Church.

The International, since such is its name, is no more than the symptom of what Freud expected of it. But *it* is not what weighs in the balance. It's the Church, the true one, which supports Marxism insofar as it gives the Church new blood... of renewed meaning (*sens*). Why not psychoanalysis, when it veers toward meaning? I am not saying that out of vain banter (*persiflage*). The stability of religion stems from the fact that meaning is always religious.

Whence my obstinacy on the path of mathemes—which

149 Lacan 1992, p. 14.

doesn't stop a thing, but bears witness to what would be needed to bring the analyst to the heel of his function. If I persevere [*père-sévère*: severe-father], it is because the experiment completed calls for a compensatory counter-experiment.¹⁵⁰

With a sigh of resignation inspired primarily by an assessment of institutionalized psychoanalysis in light of Freud's 1921 *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Lacan disbands his École freudienne. However, what he resigns himself to is not so much outright failure as repeated failure along the lines of Samuel Beckett's "Try again. Fail again. Fail better." Or, one could conceive of this as an analytic version of Thomas Jefferson's political vision according to which, "The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants."

That is to say, for Lacan, institutional parties inevitably form, and form their fixed meanings. These organizations ossify the senses (or ossify into sense) of even the most radical of founding revolutions. In Jeffersonian, or even Trotskyist-Maoist, fashion, Lacan foresees for a psychoanalysis staving off its own death a recurrent see-sawing between institutional stabilization (i.e., group consolidation as an "experiment") and renewing dissolution (hence Lacan's disbanding of his School as a "counter-experiment"). Without perpetually recurring revolution, psychoanalysis will die—or, what amounts to the same fate, become yet another established Church *à la* the International Psychoanalytic Association.

On the one hand, Lacan self-consciously is the "father" (*père*) of l'École freudienne de Paris. On the other hand, this Lacan of 1980 is a "severe-father" (*père-sévère*) in his harsh gesture of dissolution. Another severity is his "obstinacy on the path of mathemes," with its severity towards *sens*.

Yet, by Lacan's own admission, this latter severity "doesn't stop a thing." Specifically, it does not dissolve the irreducible dimension of meaning supporting and sustaining religiosity (and countless philosophies as well). At most, the mathematicist emphasis on formalizable senseless material signifiers (i.e., "the path of mathemes") is a salutary reminder to analysts that they must continually remember to listen to their analysands' associations for things other than readily recognizable meanings. The mathemes thereby help "bring the analyst to the heel of his function." But, they cannot, do not, and arguably should not bypass or nullify *sens* altogether.¹⁵¹

150 Lacan 2001c, p. 318; Lacan 1990b, p. 130.

151 Lemosof 2005a, p. 413.

The verb “awaken” (*réveiller*) surfaces a number of times in the pronouncements of the final Lacan. Stressing Lacan’s pessimism about even psychoanalysis itself in his last seminars, Miller contends that, for this thinker facing his own imminent demise, there is no awakening ever from meaning, reality, religion, philosophy, and so on.¹⁵² Miller, in the same session of his seminar on *The Very Last Lacan*, compares the conclusion of Lacan’s teaching to T.S. Eliot’s “This is how the world ends, Not with a bang, but a whimper.”¹⁵³

However, Lacan, in 1974’s “*La troisième*,” invokes awakening in a manner that pulls for a portrayal of his final years different from that offered by Miller. Therein, Lacan, speaking of his own dreams, proclaims, “contrary to those of Freud, they are not inspired by the desire to sleep; it is, rather, the desire to awaken that agitates me.”¹⁵⁴ Even if such awakening is impossible for the final Lacan, lucid dreaming is not. Such lucidity remains desirable for him.

Instead of T.S. Eliot’s “The Wasteland,” the final Lacan calls to my mind Dylan Thomas’s “Do not go gentle into that good night.” With a *Todestrieb*-like compulsion to continue trying to articulate a properly psychoanalytic teaching, even after the desire to teach leaves him,¹⁵⁵ this physically exhausted figure still fights and strives with an agitation “in him more than himself.” Lacan, while his light is dying, rages admirably against the eternal darkness. Although the darkness perhaps cannot be dispelled, it is not nothing to curse it.

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152 Miller 2006-2007, session of May 2, 2007.

153 Ibid.

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