

The Lacanian Review

Hurly-Burly

Oh
my
god(s)!!

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RELIGIONS AND THE REAL

Text established by Jacques-Alain Miller

Extract from the closing address of the Study Days of the Cartels of the Freudian School of Paris (École freudienne de Paris), Paris, 13 April 1975. [Lacan has been discussing the make-up of cartels and the number of members, from four to six.]

It is obvious from experience that communities exist that are called – and not for nothing – religious communities, which have never known, and never considered without reluctance, putting a limitation on the number of their members. It seems there is no limit on the number of people a religious community can gather. There are certainly reasons for this.

I hope to be able to make you aware of what these reasons are. For example, the fact that anonymity presides over a religious community must in itself make you feel that, in a cartel, there is a link between the small number of members and the fact that each member of this little group bears his/her own name.

It is clearly the case that our aim is not the same aim as that which dominates a religious community. What interests us in our practice is not what interests a religious community.

Calling it “religious” is a manner of speaking. What I mean is that I do not put all religions in the same bag. I have already singled out the one that is dominant in what one may call our lands, namely Christian religion.

This religion did not come from nowhere, it came out of Jewish religion, and it still bears it in a very special way. The relations between the Jewish community and the Christian community are marked by something that remains to be described. I hope that using the term, let’s say, “survival” to designate the way in which Jewish religion continues to be carried within Christian religion will not strike you as an exaggeration.

That is one way of describing it. There could be many others, ways that I will perhaps return to later.

The Trinitarian Myth

The religious community is founded on what would not be too inadequately described by calling it a myth. This is the myth that describes this God who is far from being simple, who is, even, complex, and who is so complex that it was necessary for the Christian community to let its hand be forced and describe it as a trinity. I have already said on occasion, in my seminar, what I think about this: it is not only the Christian community that realised that the only tenable God was a threefold God. Obviously much has been said, much has been written about this trinity, but what is curious is that no one has ever given any justification for it, to be sure. I think, rightly or wrongly, I have the privilege of having given, with my triple knot, a form that might be called the real of this trinity.

Someone told me that they saw – I’m letting you know because I welcome the fact with great interest – at the *Bibliothèque Nationale*, in an exhibition of miniatures, something that is currently located – this person took note of this – at the municipal library of Chartres. So, someone has apparently seen – I am waiting to see it, because after all this has to be verified – a Borromean knot with the word “*trinitas*” on the side. They apparently saw the three small lines (*traits*) by which, as you know, I sometimes symbolise this Borromean knot.

These three small lines cross over one another in the manner in which one stacks arms. You lean three rifles together and they stay upright. They lean up against one another in a circle. I haven’t said this in my seminar because it didn’t seem worth saying, but we all know that something that acts as a symbol for a certain Gaelicism, even for a Brittany that is awakening, namely the triskelion, creates these three little segments that I am in the habit of drawing for you on the blackboard as the starting point of the knot. Therefore, the written indication of the *trinitas* would be joined to this cut-down triskelion, which is just as much a Borromean knot as is the full form.

In all of that, what makes our relation? Our relation is limited to the fact that if I were to define something that could be called analysis, I would not call it a religion of any kind of supreme Being, from which many people

in our midst have never been able to detach themselves. I have already said that I am not even sure of not being caught in deistic *flagrante delicto* myself, and you'll see this perhaps immediately, if I speak, with respect to our relation, of the religion of desire.

That doesn't quite seem to be it, all the same. Above all, when desire, it seems to me, is tied to the notion of a hole, and of a hole in which many things go swirling around only to be swallowed up. But joining the notion of a whirlwind to a hole is obviously already making this hole multiple, what I mean is, making it into at least a conjunction.

To draw a whirlwind, recall my knot, the one in question. You need at least three of them to make a whirlwind hole. If there were no hole, I don't really see what we analysts would be doing. And if this hole is not at least threefold, I do not see how we would support our technique. The latter essentially refers to something that is triple, and suggests a triple hole.

As for the symbolic, in any case, it is certain that there is something tangible that creates a hole.

In everything that refers to the imaginary, that is to the corporeal, it is not only probable but manifest – and this is what emerged first – that not only does it make a hole, but analysis thinks along these lines about everything that refers to the body. The whole question is knowing in what way the effect of language, the symbolic, is necessary for conceptualising what, around the body, has been considered in analysis as tied, let's say, to various holes. There is no need here to emphasise the extent to which the oral, the anal, without referring to the others that I thought had to be added to account for what the drive is – there is no need to emphasise that the function of the orifices in the body designates for us that extending the term “hole” from the symbolic to the imaginary is no mere equivocation.

The Real is Not Whole

As for the real, it is clear that I am trying to make it operate on the basis of this simple observation that to define it as a universe is to impose it as cyclical, as circular; it is to make it encompassing in relation to this body that inhabits it; it is to make it the world. Introducing the One into the real – that is what the notion of a universe is. Now, I am not convinced that the real constitutes a world. And that is why I am trying to articulate something that for the very first time is bold enough to propose that it is not certain that the real constitutes a whole.

It is obviously difficult to see what the physics would be that one might establish on this basis, unless it were allowed that at least some portions of this universe are isolatable or *closable*. This is what the notion of energy assumes – as I think you know. The idea that energy is constant is the principle,

the basis, on which one can say that the very notion of law in physics relies. Without the idea that there is a whole, it is difficult even to see how science could support itself. But in the end, it is curious all the same that we no longer have any kind of graspable idea about the limits of this universe.

What I am proposing, what I am daring to propose, in short, is something which in principle is as follows: that nothing commits us, analysts, to make of the real something that would be a universe, that would be closed. The idea that this universe is simply consistency, the consistency of a thread that holds is not enough to make it cyclical, but the hypothesis is quite a bold one, and that is enough for us. With two cycles and one straight line extended to infinity, which already is proposing quite a lot for the real, we can create a knot, a Borromean knot that holds quite well, that forms a true knot.

The fact that we are able to support the idea that the real is not whole is a reassurance that is perhaps not without interest for physicists. Physicists will come to the idea that it is perhaps possible to think the real without placing a constant (*constance*) therein, this constant called energy. The idea is already forming here that a constant is not consistency.

Reducing the constant to consistency might perhaps be something sustainable for physicists.

Fiat Hole!

But then, I'm not here to tell you about some future physics. Our business is to appreciate something that is striking in all of our historical experience, and which is essential for us, and that is that names exist. The fact that names exist, I mean that in all of human memory, names have been given to things – this is something that seems to be a completely nodal point. The remark can even be found in Freud; it is something that should grab our attention.

I remember that when I wrote “The Freudian Thing” there were heaps of people around me who pursed their lips: “Why does he call it that? The Thing! That is disgusting, when all we have ever been trying to do is to prevent reification.” Speaking for myself, I have never held that view. I have never thought that when a rupture occurred, as in 1953, it was because of a divergence of views over the reification or not of what our practice was about. It was about reifying in a good way.

If I called something the Thing, and specifically the Freudian Thing, it is obviously so as to indicate that there was some Freud in the Thing, in that Thing that he named. What he named is the unconscious. The term “Freudian” does not at all function as a predicate here, it is not a thing that has the property of being Freudian after the fact. It is quite certain that it is

because Freud spoke about it that it is a thing. As I was suggesting to someone recently, it is not such a bad way of expressing oneself to speak of the unconscious as something that did not exist before Freud. And there is a good reason for this – it is that after all a thing only ex-sists, only begins to come into play (*jouer*), once it has been well and truly named by someone.

We can take the liberty, just like that, of splashing names over all sorts of things – people have always done it, and they've always done it indiscriminately. And so, I am trying to manage to reduce this nameable on the basis of our experience. I am trying to limit myself to naming only what with Freud I call the *Urverdrängt*, which in short comes down to naming the hole. This is to start with the idea of a hole. It is to say, not *Fiat lux*, but *Fiat hole*.

Do accept that in advancing the idea of the unconscious Freud did no more than this. Very early on he said that there was something that makes a hole, that it is around this hole that the unconscious is distributed, and that the property of this unconscious is only to be sucked in by this hole. It is so completely sucked in that we are not even in the habit, and you can say that again, of retaining even one little bit of it – it disappears completely into this hole.

To speak of the Freudian Thing as constituted essentially by this hole, this hole that has a site in the symbolic, is to say something that can at least be sustained for a while, as my own case proves. And as it has now been quite a while and there have not been too many valid criticisms of what I have said, it is already starting to at least gain support through having lasted so long.

From Dialectics to Topology

I identify this hole with topology – I alluded to this in my most recent seminar. I think that I pointed out, and made at least some people feel, that topology cannot be conceptualised without knots. As I was saying just before in another room, a knot is not simply something in the real, even though this is where it has its form as a knot, but it is also in the 'mental'. There are knots in the mental as well. This is the first time that one sees something that joins the mental and the real together at this point.

It really is impossible not to place knots in the mental. At the same time, it is impossible not to be aware that the mental is very poorly adapted to knots. The mental thinks knots with such difficulty that it is impossible not to see there something that in some ways would give us what in my last seminar I called something like a presentiment, as it were, of what the hole in question might well be at the end of the day.

All of this is, of course, the haste – why not say so? – that comes after one's wanderings (*errance*). Everybody knows that I have taken pride in

dialectics, and that I used to use this term before I came to this whirlwind. We can now appreciate that whoever speaks of dialectics is always evoking a substance. Dialectics is essentially predicative, it creates antinomies, and there is no predicate that is not itself supported by a substance. It is very, very difficult to speak a-substantively, especially since we imagine that we ourselves are each a substance.

It is obviously very difficult to get that out of your head, even though everything demonstrates that you are each at best only a little hole – albeit a complex and turbulent hole. However, it is really very, very difficult to think of oneself as a substance, except as a substance that has the property of being a thinking substance, and then, it becomes truly exasperating to think how impotent your thought manifestly is. It seems more solid to refer to other categories.

We would be better off realising for example that one can, without absurdity, observe, with some possibility of getting it right, propositions such as the following: if there is undecidability, it is undecidability that is supported only by the fact that we knot it. There is undecidability, but our idea of it comes only from this assurance, taken precisely from mathematics, that there are no non-knots, as it were, since this is, in sum, the only possible definition of the real. Tightening knots, even if it is so as to not keep slipping endlessly – that is what we work at doing in analysis.

Irruption of the Private Into the Public

What then is analysis, ultimately? It is this thing that can be characterised as follows: it is when we allow ourselves a kind of irruption of the private into the public. 'The private' evokes the wall protecting everyone's personal stuff. Everyone's personal stuff has a perfectly characteristic nucleus, which consists of sexual stuff. That is the nucleus of the private.

It is even funny that for etymologists the 'public' into which we bring the private has a completely manifest link with '*pubis*'. That which is public emerges from what is shameful, for how are we to distinguish what is private from what we are ashamed of? It is clear that the indecency of all that, the indecency of what takes place in an analysis, disappears, as it were, owing to castration, a dimension analysis is well able to evoke since Freud. The entire question then is the following: is extracting jouissance from castration what surplus-jouissance is? In any case, this is all that is permitted, for the moment, to any person – assuming, that is, that there are any persons for the word 'person' to designate. It designates a thinking substance, no doubt, but even when our preoccupations are not at all substantial, nor *substantophoric*, what we strive for is to make the notion of thinking substance fit within a real. Well, that doesn't happen automatically, for sure, because there is a heap of things that get in the way.

Death is Purely Imaginary

The idea of life, for example, gets in the way. It is that sort of idea. It is quite curious that Freud advocated Eros, but that, despite everything, he did not dare to identify it completely with the idea of life, and that he nevertheless distinguished between the life of the body and life as it is conveyed by the body in the germ cells. Despite the use that Freud makes of it, as it were, there is something that life has nothing to do with, and which passes for its antinomy, namely death. Whatever one thinks about it, death is purely imaginary.

If there were no *corpse*,¹ if there were no cadaver, what would make us link life to death? Naturally, this idea of leeks, of a bunch of cadavers [*cette idée du poireau, la botte de cadavres*], we are quite good at knotting it; it is even our main task. There are also statues, the infuriated side of these so-called human beings that fabricate their own statues, that is, things that have absolutely nothing to do with the body but which resemble it nevertheless.

The religions that prohibited this obscenity are to be blessed. Moreover, they are something horrible to look at! What is more horrible to look at than a human being, I ask you! A human being, a human form. It really takes the so-called Catholic religion for someone to delight in it. Apparently, it has some profit to gain from it. It is obvious, we can see the mechanism very clearly – it is playing upon the beautiful. And anyway, what is all this tall tale of the Gospel about, if not the exaltation of the beautiful?

I'll show you that some other time.

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Translated by Russell Grigg

1. English in original