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THE MONSTROSITY OF THE OTHER

The Monstrosity of Christ is an important event, an asymmetrical synthesis of sorts between John Milbank and Slavoj Žižek, an impossible encounter concocted in the mad-scientist brain of Creston Davis. As Davis explains in his introduction, Žižek's philosophy and Milbank's theology both emerged in the 1990s in response to a triumphant but vapid capitalism. By stitching together Milbank's theology of Radical Orthodoxy and Žižek's materialist Christian atheism, we can glimpse a "revolutionary political problematic: How can the theological and the material unite to fund resistance to capitalist nihilism?"¹ To replace the capitalist secularist logic of liberalism that ultimately issues in nihilism, Davis constructs another either/or: either Milbank's "paradox of Resurrection Sunday" or Žižek's "dialectic of Holy Saturday." Put in these terms, however, there really is no choice. We cannot (even if we desperately want to) simply choose Sunday over Saturday, paradox over dialectics, or even vice versa. But it is the inter-working of the two that propels authentic theological thought forward.

It will surprise nobody that I "side" with Žižek against Milbank in this debate. Furthermore, since I have already published a broader response to this book,² here I will confine my remarks to Žižek's second piece, "Dialectical Clarity versus the Mystical Conceit of Paradox." I affirm Žižek's opposition to Milbank concerning the death of God, but I want to reflect further on the Pauline problematic of law and love in Lacanian terms that Žižek addresses, from the standpoint of Lorenzo Chiesa's excellent study *Subjectivity and Otherness*. Based on Chiesa's interpretation of Lacan, I suggest that Žižek does not so much

¹Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?*, ed. Creston Davis (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009), p.4. Page numbers for future references in parentheses.

²See Clayton Crockett, "Monstrosity Exhibition," *Expositions: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities*, Volume 4, Numbers 1-2, 2010, pp.114-122.

resolve as reiterate the Pauline problem. This problem concerns how the symbolic continues to function despite the recognition that there is no support of symbolic Law, there is no Other of the Other. There is no love without law; love cannot operate without law, despite the fantasy that this is possible. But what is love in the absence of any support of law, or Name-of-the-Father as guarantee of the symbolic order?

In his response to Milbank, Žižek takes issue with Milbank's affirmation of a paradoxical love manifested in phenomenological terms that despite its paradoxicality nevertheless points to a transcendent source that can only be articulated with a "Catholic metaphysics of participation" (123). Žižek takes the radical implications of the incarnation and crucifixion of Christ more seriously, claiming that "for me, there is no transcendent God-Father who discloses himself to us, humans, only in a limited way" (235). Žižek endorses the radical theologian Thomas J.J. Altizer, "whose vision of the death of God retains a properly apocalyptic shattering power," as opposed to John D. Caputo, whose weak God "appears much too aseptic, lifeless, bloodless, lacking the properly religious passion" (260). The death of God in Lacanian terms means that "there is no big Other," which is "the true formula for atheism" (297).

So long as the big Other exists, there is the Symbolic order, which is founded on the Name-of-the-Father. The Symbolic order provides the Law, which is a kind of social unconscious that structures our rituals and beliefs. Here Law is associated stereotypically with Judaism in a Freudian-Lacanian reading: "the problem of shofar—the voice of the dying father rendered in the Jewish ritual by the low ominously reverberating sound of a horn—is that of the rise of the Law out of the Father's death" (296). Something of the Father has to survive to sustain and perpetuate the Law, but this is what Christianity does away with in the Crucifixion, according to Žižek. For Christianity, the cry of Christ on the cross is the cry of the Father to Himself, for his own death and self-sacrifice.

The problem with this radicalized version of Christianity is that it is impossible to maintain, because the Law is always smuggled back in, along with the transcendent Father. This problem mirrors the problem that Lacan faces in his famous Seminar VII, where he still retains a kind of faith in the big Other as Law-of-the-Father that sustains the symbolic order. But Žižek says that "the true formula of atheism is not 'God is dead,' but 'God is unconscious'" (297). Lacan shifts away from the big Other and abandons the Law-of-the-Father after 1960, and this has important consequences for human belief. If the fundamental conception of atheism is "God is dead," then everything rests on the intentional, conscious and propositional belief, whether it be belief in God, Nation, Love, or whatever. But if the formula for atheism becomes "God is unconscious," then the real issue is less one's intentional beliefs, but how one's beliefs are structured, which is indirectly by relation to the big Other who believes for me. If there is no big Other, then God is not the Other, but God is strictly speaking unconscious.

How do we have and sustain beliefs if the big Other does not exist? Belief in God becomes the belief in belief, the belief that someone else believes, and that that

belief is healthy, meaningful and providential, and wards off nihilism and social anarchy, even if "I" do not have the faith to believe. Žižek says "to be truly an atheist, one has to accept that the big Other doesn't exist, and act upon it" (299). But how can one act according to the nonexistence of the big Other without being or appearing insane? Is not the rejection of the symbolic order a form of madness? At the end of the book, Žižek elaborates his ethical materialism that in its rejection of morality necessarily appears monstrous. Discussing characters from the novel *The Notebook* by Agota Kristof, Žižek argues that the world would be a better place if "sentimentality would be replaced by a cold and cruel passion" (303).

This cold and cruel passion is what Lacan calls *jouissance*, which is the problem of the big Other's nonexistence after Seminar VII. *Jouissance* is not pleasure, but pleasure taken to an extreme, and in Seminar VII, so long as the big Other functions as a kind of super-ego, the duty to be truthful to one's desire provides a radicalization of the problem Lacan sets up between Kant's absolute moral law and Sade's absolute perversion. The ultimate embodiment of *jouissance* in Seminar VII is Antigone, and it is her rejection of the symbolic order in favor of her commitment to *jouissance* that Lacan admires, even though it leads to her death. But this rejection is too atheistic, in the first sense of "God is dead;" or rather, it is not atheistic enough.

In order to better understand the implications of the rejection of the big Other, and the idea that "God is unconscious," I want to turn to Lorenzo Chiesa's account of this problem, at the end of *Subjectivity and Otherness*. According to Chiesa, in Seminar VII "Lacan definitely thinks that the Pauline dialectic between the law and desire...can be overcome by a radical transgression carried out by the superegoic law itself."³ The ethics of psychoanalysis, exemplified by Antigone's sublime desire for death, avoids the twin dangers of Kant (Law) and Sade (Pleasure/Lust), even though all three indicate an extremity of *jouissance* that reaches beyond the Symbolic. "Antigone's act is at the root of psychoanalysis,"⁴ but Antigone's pure desire is radically destructive, because it is the desire for death as such, and it is still related, albeit negatively, to the big Other.

Chiesa traces the shift of Lacan beyond Seminar VII following his abandonment of the big Other as guarantee of the symbolic order. There is no Other of the Other, which means that the symbolic is ungrounded; it floats. According to Chiesa, "in his late work Lacan progressively acknowledges that 'inherent' *jouissance* is, in a radical sense, the only possible *jouissance*."⁵ Inherent *jouissance* is caught up with Lacan's formulation of an *objet petit a*, or a little bit of an other that metonymically symbolizes the subject's desire. The *jouissance* of object *a* "is

³Lorenzo Chiesa, *Subjectivity and Otherness: A Philosophical Reading of Lacan* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007), p.175.

⁴Ibid., p.176.

⁵Ibid., p.183.

a remainder of the Real which tears holes in the symbolic structure.”⁶ We never have access to the Real as Real, even in Lacan’s late work, but only as already symbolized and imagined. Here desire and drive converge, and “the drive supplies a partial ‘masochistic’ satisfaction of unconscious desire precisely through the dissatisfaction of *jouis-sans*,” the play on words that indicates that jouissance is fundamentally lacking for a subject. The lesson of Lacan’s late work, despite his provocative speculations about woman’s jouissance and God, is that we are all screwed, because we can only achieve very provisional and partial satisfaction by recognizing that we are stuck within the very dialectic of law and love that Lacan attempted to transcend in Seminar VII. Even though the Law has no ground or support, it still functions by means of object *a*, and this lack structures desire in an unavoidable way that constrains the subject even as she possesses limited means of affirming this lack in love. This is very sad, pitiful even, because the acknowledgement that God is unconscious here means that atheism itself is *jouis-sans*, without joy. Just play with your object *a* and your X-Box and get whatever little satisfaction you can, and your atheism can justify your lack of any moral scruples. Is this what Žižek’s coldness and cruelty really amounts to?

But there is another possibility, associated with the name of Joyce. As Chiesa explains, in Seminar XXIII Joyce “abolishes the symbol” by means of “his identification with the *sinthome*’ (as the naming of one’s Real).”⁷ The *sinthome* refers to “the emergence of J (A barred), which concerns “the naming of the Real and the ‘marking’ of *jouissance*.”⁸ The A refers to the big Other (Autre), which is barred or nonfunctioning, and J (A barred) indicates an overlapping of Real and Imaginary without the Symbolic. The *sinthome* involves the production of one’s symptom as symbolic, but it evades and avoids the “Name-of-the-Father.” Joyce is paradigmatic of this possibility, because the symbolic does not function normally for him; “his paternal metaphor was defective; it had to be supplemented by the writer.”⁹ The only truly liberating possibility in Lacan’s late work, then, is not the mystical embrace of feminine jouissance, but the ability to manifest one’s *jouis-sens* by writing it without any paternal support. As Chiesa concludes: “the name ‘Joyce’ is a ‘singular universal’: Joyce reaches a substitutive version of the Name-of-the-Father—thus individualized and anti-ideological by definition—precisely by writing his *jouis-sens*.”¹⁰

What does this mean? Chiesa advocates constructing a new Master-Signifier for politics using the name Marx, and this politics would accord with a later Lacanian ethics of psychoanalysis. But let’s go back to the Pauline dialectic of law and love. Basically, what if we take the name Paul in the same way as Lacan understands Joyce, as a singular universal? Paul writes the dialectic, and he is able to write the dialectic only because Christ comes to supplement his defective

⁶Ibid., p.184.

⁷Ibid., p.188.

⁸Ibid., p.188.

⁹Ibid., p.190.

¹⁰Ibid., p.190.

paternal metaphor. Furthermore, the only way to evade or overcome the Pauline dialectic is to repeat Paul, to be a new St. Paul.¹¹

Theologically, that means to truly take responsibility for atheism. To become a *sinthome* means to take the place and write from the place where God is unconscious, to become one's own father and write and re-write the symbolic. As Lacan says in Seminar XX,

The Other, the Other as the locus of truth, is the only place, albeit an irreducible place, that we can give to the term 'divine being,' to call him by his name. God (*Dieu*) is the locus where, if you will allow me this wordplay, the *dieu*—the *dieur*—the *dire*, is produced. With a trifling change, the *dire* constitutes *Dieu*. And as long as things are said, the God hypothesis will persist.¹²

God is here identified with the locus of the Other, but where does God come from and how is God produced? From the region where the Real and Imaginary intersect, that is, J (A barred). To simply accept God as the big Other or Name-of-the-Father or guarantee of the symbolic order is to commit idolatry, because it is to reify the symbolic as real. But the "God hypothesis" persists in spite of our atheism, because we are speaking beings, which is why Nietzsche said that we still believe in God because we have faith in language, and why Lacan says that Religion will always triumph over psychoanalysis. God is unconscious, and must be written into being as *jouis-sens*, which is the task of a truly radical theology. As Lacan concludes, "that is why, in the end, only theologians can be truly atheistic, namely, those who speak of God."¹³

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¹¹See the sequel to *The Monstrosity of Christ* featuring the same cast of characters, Creston Davis, John Milbank and Slavoj Žižek, (plus a cameo by Catherine Pickstock) *Paul's New Moment: Continental Philosophy and the Future of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010).

¹²*Encore: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge 1972-1973*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), p.45.

¹³*Ibid.*, p.45.