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# Apophatic Psychoanalysis: The Plenitude of the Negative

*Introduction: The era of the positive*

In his new work *Surplus Jouissance: A guide for the non-perplexed*, Žižek states the spiritual plight of our situation:

[We are saturated with] extreme right-wing conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 pandemic [and how they] get combined with New Age spirituality. Melissa Rein Lively's focus on wellness, natural health, organic food, yoga, ayurvedic healing, meditation, etc., led her into a violent rejection of vaccines as a source of dangerous contamination. (Žižek, 2022: 10)

What we call spirituality today plays an important ideological supplement in modern political discourse in online spaces and much more. We see the rise of a spiritual-therapeutic-moralist discourse that replaces old forms of morality while creating new anxieties (Waldman, 2021). We also see it being utilised to re-instantiate the reign of a lost paternalism. Thus, we see it in Jordan Peterson's self-help and Qanon's reactionary-mythology building (Bowles, 2018; Dickson, 2020; Peterson, 2018). We can term this therapy-spiritual discourse Toxic Positivity (Wright, 2014: 791–813).

It is part of what we can call the attention economy (Seymour, 2019: 23-24). The attention economy is what Marika Rose's work *on Machines of Loving Grace* highlights in the transition from the old analogous worldview of participation to our disembodied techno-spiritual world that works on exotic algorithms and formulas operating to create a fused form of cyborg subjectivity optimised so these systems can extract and circulate labour value (Rose, 2017: 240–258).

In more detail, Richard Seymour's new work, *The Twittering Machine*, suggests that our new digitally mediated experientialist paradigm functions through an economy of addiction and attention (Seymour, 2019: 19-21). He argues that this addiction should be framed as a type of malformed devotion we are commanded to engage in at an unconscious level through the hidden injunction of the screen. Reflecting this, Lembke argues that since the turn of the millennium, behavioural – as opposed to substance -addictions have soared. Her new book stresses that we are now all addicts to a degree due to the attention and experience economy bolstering our attachment to the Smart Phone (Lembke, 2021).

Seymour's work is an expanded critique and analysis of the attention economy's movements and the effects on subjectivity and politics. In his view, the use of spirituality, self-help, and other technologies of the self, in this paradigm, are merely other methods through which our attention is captured. By capturing our

attention, we are monetised through the promise of experiential wholeness and bliss. In short, the promise of happiness

Jacques-Alain Miller detected the outlines of this problem in 2002 when he explained the following:

Robert Reich's idea is that there is an economy of attention and an offer of attention, therefore a market for artificial attention. [...]He, thus, delineates the development of a whole sector of specialised activities in the service of attention. This allows him to create a category where we also find personal gym teachers, those who do shopping...and the entire set of psychological, spiritual advisors [...]The functioning of this machine...exacerbates nostalgia for the master signifiers, and this appeal to the master signifier is all the more exacerbated as it appears detached from the rest, and all the more insistent that it clearly appears as supplementary. (J.-A. Miller, 2019: 116-117,123)

For Miller, this new era of addiction – what he calls the machine of the not-all – is the era of *jouissance-as-such*, an era of regimes of spiritual and psychological enjoyment and nostalgia for master signifiers. All are defined by a truncated return for positivity and wholeness.

### *The negativity of psychoanalysis?*

But this raises the question, what is the place of the negative in our world today as a solution? How does it insert itself into and disrupt the 'libidinal economies' of healing, spirituality and commodified moralism that saturate our discourses today? What is the place of the negative in Lacanian psychoanalysis, and how does it operate in a world that has fundamentally changed in the last decade? Further still, how, in a world saturated with a toxic positive *jouissance* that isolates, how do we situate the last Lacan with his turn to the positive?

This work explores the negative in both psychoanalytic practice and what we can call the logics of darkness spirituality as the antithesis of our attention economy. It traces a shift in our modern predicament where what we call the libidinal economy has become defined not by negativity but an overbearing positivity.

The apophatic is a term from mystical theology that means negation. It stems from the early days of Christianity and neo-platonic thinkers like Pseudo-Dionysius, who argue that we cannot say what God is but only what he is not. The apophatic is a necessary negation at the centre of the Christian tradition. However, we can also suggest that negation is at the heart of the psychoanalytic tradition, and we see this in Freud's central text, *On Negation*.

The problem today, however, is that the negative is either related to discourses of pure negativity and emptiness or to extraordinary religious experience and healing discourses that focus on wholeness at the imaginary level.

I also believe that certain psychological healing discourses fall into these categories also. But, unfortunately, some also can fall into a cynical end of analysis – which is presenting in modern culture as doomerism – focusing on pure emptiness, or they veer into a cloying optimism defined by shallow sentimental positivism (Coaston, 2022; Milman, 2022).

In opposition to this, I state that the concept of the apophatic in mystical theology leads to a plenitude, a clo(u)d of unknowing, an ineffable encounter with the divine. I argue that 'negative abundance' should not be judged at the level of 'sublime pre-discursive experience.' Instead, it relates directly to an ancient practice of apophasis that relates to a wider structure and its excessive element.

My argument here is if we wish to preserve the potency of psychoanalysis that resists logics of psychologistic utility, then, ostensibly, it should borrow from the structural discourse of mystical theology.

But a problem arises: how can we talk about Lacan's overall teaching being apophatic when the very late Lacan is distinctly positive in its operation, focusing on Jouissance, the One and the body? Surely this would be the opposite of Lacan's earlier apophatic phase being cataphatic in operation?

I attempt to answer this below. I argue that traditional apophysis is not merely structurally negative (it is not merely mysticism),[1] as the negative always desires to be filled; nature abhors a void. The true mystical is always – in the end – radically opaque and full to the extent that it elides all epistemic, psychological, experiential, and linguistic frameworks. And it is this understanding of the mystical as disruptive fullness that coheres with Lacan's later teaching and the concept of the School. To do this, I show how questions of the Sinthome and the body connect with ideas stemming from Bauerschmidt's radical interpretation of Julian of Norwich.

The apophatic and cataphatic are terms related to mystical theology. Apophatic means 'without words,' and cataphatic means 'with images and representation.' This form of theology is rooted in Pseudo Dionysius's work in the 6<sup>th</sup> century (Dionysius, 1987). In short, his work, *The Mystical Theology*, argues that we must learn to unsay the divine in approaching the divine. It is a theology of unsaying God (McIntosh, 1998: 125-126). To know anything of the divine involves a process of unknowing: it is divine ignorance; as Nicholas of Cusa would later say, 'all we know of the truth is that the absolute truth, such as it is, is beyond our reach.' (Cusanus, 2007: 11-12)

Over time though, the mystical concept has taken on a different resonance. In the past, it was more associated with a past textual, structural, and communal practice (McIntosh, 1998: 44-56). The apophatic *mystical was thus about entering more deeply into a community that cannot be fully said, defined or captured*. It was less about a given extraordinary 'experience' and more about how a measured operative negativity sustains itself in a communal-structural framework. It was thus inherently catechetical, *mystagogical* and liturgical. The latter term comes from the Greek *leitourgia*, which means work of the people. *It was about a structure we participated in, which organises itself around a central mystery that constantly causes the structure to revise itself through a 'work' we can never fully understand* (McIntosh, 1998: 44-56).

But unfortunately, the mystical is now associated precisely with religious experience as a passive vitalist mysticism: the idea that we give up words to focus on an internal, emotional experience that words fail to grasp (Tyler, 2011: 3-25). And this now goes hand in hand with modern individualism and the commodification associated with a saturated self-help culture.[2] We see plenty of work co-opting this experientialist understanding of the mystical into self-help and mindfulness schemas. As Carrette and King argue, the mystical is no longer merely a 'private experience' of the sublime Good *but a privatised experience*. (2004: 26-27).

Like Pseudo Dionysius, negation is at the heart of Freud's theory, as seen in his first publication of 1925 of the same name:

Only one consequence of the process of negation is undone—the fact, namely, of the ideational content of what is repressed not reaching consciousness. The outcome of this is a kind of intellectual acceptance of the repressed, while at the same time what is essential to the repression persists. (Akhtar & O'Neil, 2018, p. 55)

However, the radical negativity of Freud's discovery of the unconscious has arguably given way to treating the negative as a kind of transitionary point toward from which we can find emotional healing, affective wholeness, and the like. The negation of repression in its various guises – neurosis, hysteria – gives way to knowledge and healing, the positive.[3]

And although we can talk about radical negativity in Freud, the tendency toward a *joui-sense* – meaning – is always there. This is due to the Freudian articulation of the symptom and the unconscious. Indeed, the Symptom for Freud is something that 'wants to say' (Stevens, 2007: 211–221). And the work of an analysis

aims to connect, interpret, and uncover the meaning of the symptom. Hence any apophasis that exists ends up becoming positive. So, maybe the transition to psychological positivism – as we see above – was due to its inherent attachment to sense?

### *The negative in Lacan*

Lacan was aware of this radical negativity and its absolute centrality in psychoanalysis. The negative starts in Lacan's writings in the imaginary with misrecognition, which he borrows from Hegel's master-slave dialectic (Eyers, 2012, p. 15n). We then see the symbolic order's inherent negativity as Lacan places precedence on the signifier and how it cuts into the body to create metonymy and metaphor. Later, we see how Lacan focuses on the Real as the final instance of the negative.

The latter concept came to the fore in 1953 in a lecture called *Le symbolique, l'imaginaire et le reel*. Lacan introduced the Real in this lecture as connected with the imaginary and the symbolic. However, its negative operation really starts to come to the fore in Seminar VII (Kesel, 2009). Here he relates the concept of *Das Ding* with the figure of Antigone in seminar VII as one who refuses to give up on her desire in the face of the law. [4] As Paul Allen Miller states:

Antigone's choice, her desire, is pure precisely to the degree that it rejects the claims of the Other to dictate its objects or form. For Lacan, it is the beauty of Antigone's choice of a Good beyond all recognised goods, beyond the pleasure principle, that gives her character its monumental status and makes her a model for an ethics of creation as opposed to conformity. (Miller, 2007: 1–14)

The logic of Antigone is a logic toward the negative. She gives up false positivity and aims with a Kantian-like duty toward negation as the full expression of desire at the expense of any utilitarian expression (J.-A. Miller, 2019). This is a pure apophasis with the void as the goal. Seminar VII represents a turning point in Lacan's seminars, where we see the intersection of apophatic negativity associated with the logic of desire toward the apophasis associated with the fullness of *Jouissance* as a transgression of a barrier (J.-A. Miller, 2019).

### *The positive in the last Lacan?*

However, a theoretical problem arises here. The general view is that the early Lacan focused on the negative and, later on, the positive. How, then, can we say that the products of the later Lacan (the Sinthome, The One-All-Alone, The Not-All and the Analytic Act) are still apophatic? How can this be the case when Lacan speaks of *Jouissance-as-such* without any opposition? What are we to make of Lacan's insistence that the subject is happy? Surely this negativity should apply only to the middle and early Lacan? This is all the more the case when we focus on desire and negative theological proponents.

But this is not entirely accurate. Indeed, it is the case that radical negativity as practice first took the role of explication on desire, the subject and later *object a* and *the drive*. It was explained as the gap between the signifier and signified regarding the bedrock of castration. However, *the negativity of the early Lacan ran into issues precisely because the signifier's trajectory always relates to absence calling out to be filled in some way. So, there is a temptation there to fill negativity.*

The later Lacan starts with the radical positive of *Jouissance* but insofar that its negative operation plays out not in an absence but in its senseless opacity. He states in seminar 24:

What does it mean to deny? What can one deny? This plunges us into the *Verneinung* of which Freud has put forward the essentials. What he enunciates is that negation presupposes a *Bejahung*

*[affirmation]*. It is starting from something that is enunciated as positive, that one writes negation. (Lacan, 1977: 117–118)

In this specific passage, Lacan addresses the nature of speech as being predicated on the positive. But writing – rather than speech – becomes associated with failure and negation. Speech, for Lacan, becomes less related to the work of the signifier and more to do with what he calls *lalangue*. Moreover, the opacity of such speech beyond the signifier is even more negative than absence because density resists meaning in a way an analysis predicated on the chain of signifiers of the early Lacan could not (Dupont, 2020: 15–37).

Interestingly enough, this radical fullness reflects modern scholarship in mystical theology. Lacan's later work follows modern theological ideas about how we should reject the tendency to oppose non-experiential structural contemplative practice to a supposed cataphatic imaginary. For instance, Julian of Norwich is usually seen as the archetype of an experientialist cataphatic mysticism, focusing wholly on apparitions and sensations in opposition to the desirative emptiness of contemplative prayer. In contrast, mystics like John of the Cross and Meister Eckhart are seen as the pinnacle of a negative theology that hollows out the self entirely.

However, as Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt argues, this is not quite correct. He argues that Julian's mystical encounter with the speaking body of Christ that we see in Julian's work goes beyond cataphatic and apophatic distinctions as a radical confrontation with the negative fullness of Christ's mangled body as the letter. Moreover, the encounter leads to a disruptive effect and the creation of a new social bond – born from Love -over her lifetime as a confrontation with her mother tongue (*lalangue*), as Christ – the word – is perceived as a mother. Raul Moncayo speaks of the relationship between *lalangue* and Sinthome as the inverse relation between signifier and symptom. *Lalangue* is the mother-tongue, the singular use of the word without meaning. In this field, the symptom becomes Sinthome as the style of writing that allows the imaginary, symbolic and real to hold together (Moncayo, 2019, p. 30).

I argue that this encounter with the body is a type of positivised void that allows for space of radical invention that typifies Lacan's approach to *Jouissance*-as-such. In other words, Julian's encounter with *lalangue* represents the creation of the Joycean Sinthome, but also a leaving behind of that name toward the invention of the Other.

### *The Not-All?*

Seminar XX is famously known as the mystical seminar (Lacan, 1999). In the seminar, we begin to see the full transition from an understanding of the mystical apophatic from a practice of constitutive lack and desire to a disruptive mute opacity that becomes connected to disruption, silence, and the body. As Miller states succinctly:

The not-all is not a whole that contains a lack. On the contrary, it is a series in development without limit. (J.-A. Miller, 2019, p. 120)

Miller explains that if the clinic operated by the classifications of the 'All' with clear demarcations and categories in the past, societal transitions have now resulted in 'globalisation' (J.-A. Miller, 2019). This new economic and political order has removed paternal ordered limits and resulted in many symptoms beyond the previous nosological categories of past analysis. In short, our current political and economic paradigm is the machine of the not-all, as it is saturated with a totalising positivity precisely because all external limits or means to categorise are removed. Other *Jouissance*, then, can be understood as the space that is opened up by analysis that disrupts this totalising tendency. Lacan located this other *Jouissance* with what can be called the mystical. *But it should not be understood solely as an extraordinary individual experience*. Indeed, in the globalised machine of the not-all and how it consistently captures attention and experience, psychoanalysis cannot be just another psy-spiritual experience among many.

Other Jouissance, to be sure, is *not without affective experience*, but to focus on extraordinary experience as the arbiter of content is to miss the point. [5] Moreover, this idea of a pre-discursive experientialist substance as being the experientialist ‘presence’ of mystical Other Jouissance in seminar XX is taken directly to task by Miller in his *The One is the Letter*, where he states:

The dividing line passes through this term I have used of prediscursive being. [The Real] arises from language working on language, it presupposes the logical apparatus seizing what is said[...]in order to make [it] emerge. This real at the level of existence is a signifier – nothing to do with the presence that palpitates. (Miller, 2021: 13–44)

The real is not a direct confrontation with some pre-discursive mystical substance: the transgression of the early Antigone and her massive Jouissance. No, Other Jouissance is the failure of the totalising tendency to fully capture us. It thus gives us access to what is at stake in the failure of the non-rapport: the one of the letter—the nonsensical letter all alone *is* our confrontation with the Real.[6]

In this sense, Other Jouissance can be understood far less bombastic than what is otherwise made out. It relates – Brousse argues – to the unsaying of speech in the various contexts we engage in daily. It means becoming disruptive mute points in a field of saturated signifiers. It is to disidentify with semblants – moment to moment – by relating directly to the antagonism inherent in the social bond that is otherwise excluded in repression.

For Brousse, this apophatic operation comes in three categories: *hiding, disappearing and silence*. In each category, what is at stake is a mode of subtle resistance to ascribed identity by saying what I am not or, more accurately, *it is a way of not being fully present by not being wholly there by being something that does not belong to the set itself*. As Zupan*?* says, what takes place is that an external point is brought into the field of totality (2017, p. 10). It presents as a ‘negative surplus’ – a clod of unknowing – in the symbolic field. To reduce it to an imaginary affect, albeit in negative language, is to miss the point.

### *The Sinthome: beyond apophatic and cataphatic*

What comes into view in the later Lacan is the Sinthome as an expression of the Real. The latter is unrelated to the signifier but rather that radical un-meaning of *lalangue* as opposed to the binary of the signifier. In this sense, it is ‘One.’

In seminar 23, Lacan shows that the desirative logic that we attribute to those of neurotic structure with their reliance on the Name-of-the-Father is not a special signifier but just another signifier amongst others that works to bind together the triadic structure of the subject. His point in this seminar is that Joyce – being the psychotic that he was – did not have the paternal signifier and so – through the use of artifice – fashioned a Sinthome himself to stabilise his subjectivity.

A Sinthomatic analysis – much like negative theology – moves through the structure of an analysis until there is a stripping away of ephemera, and one hits an opaque point. This is the symptom in all its opacity. It is at this point that Voruz argues that there is a choice between two kinds of negativity: two kinds of apophasis (2022: 118-119). The first is to approach it as something to believe in—a space which can be filled with meaning. The symptom is something that can be answered by the Other. It can be interpreted. This is the traditional approach to psychoanalysis, the Freudian endeavour, and the deadlock where negativity always wishes to be filled (Voruz, 2022: 118-119). Moreover, this is the way of desire and the dark night of the soul as emptiness.

The second is much more radical and tries to start from the symptom’s radical fullness. It is radically without meaning, but it constantly returns in iteration—this term is differentiated from repetition, as repetition has to do with sense and meaning. And meaning is linked to the call of the symptom, not the

Sinthome (Stevens, 2007).

The Sinthome encounter repeats our first encounter with language itself, the first bite of the linguistic that carves a hole in the body for sense to appear. The first encounter subtracts the one and leaves the 0. And from this point of *ex nihilo*, the signifier appears as S1. But – as Dupont explains – beneath the signifier, a trace exists ‘as an inarticulable defence against the real’ (Dupont, 2020: 15–37). And it is this trace as speech that functions as the substance of what Lacan calls *lalangue*. It emanates from the Real itself through ‘use’ as a defence against the Real. And as Lacan points out, there is a Real of the Symbolic, The Imaginary and the Body.

In Žižek’s new book *Surplus Jouissance*, he takes to task the supposed monism and positivity of Meister Eckhart and his supposed predilection toward the One:

The unique role of Christ is something that escapes mysticism even at its best, which means, of course, Meister Eckhart. Eckhart was on the right track when he said that he’d rather go to Hell with God than to heaven without—but *his ultimate horizon of the mystical unity of man and God as the abyssal Oneness in which man and God as separate entities disappear* prevents him from drawing all the consequences from his insight. (Žižek, 2022, p.315)

Žižek is correct in positing the problem of ‘mysticism,’ but mysticism is – as I have argued – not the mystical. Hence, my contention here is that Žižek is wrestling with the value of Eckhart’s apophatic tendency in a world saturated with a toxic positivity that reduces all to the One. Indeed, toxic positive healing discourse is a discursive practice that reduces all to a false wholeness that acts as an ideological supplement to our hellscape. Hence, he needs to create a fundamental difference in the sophisticated theology of Eckhart by showing that it is not-one. *However, his mistake is found in moving forward from a position of constitutive negativity. He must show Christ as the negative point that stops an all-encompassing positivity.* Consequently, he alters the mystical apophasis of Eckhart by literally introducing the body of Christ to disrupt the oneness; he says:

It is my contention that one should replace here ‘God’ with ‘Christ’ one cannot be without God in Heaven because God IS Heaven, and the only way God can be in Hell is in the figure of Christ. The reason we have to replace ‘God’ with ‘Christ’ is thus simply that this is the only way to make Eckhart’s proposition meaningful in a Christian sense. (Žižek, 2022, p. 317)

However, in contrast to this, Julian of Norwich directly shows the limitations of an empty contemplative mysticism and directly introduces the body of Christ from the position of radical positivity. With Julian, there is a radical aloneness that is disrupted not with negation but with a further encounter with the positive.

Even in her visions of the bleeding hellish crucified body of Christ on the Cross, she tries to lift her eyes toward heaven to see God (the constitutive exception), but her eyes are pulled directly to the speaking body: the full antagonistic point within the symbolic field. Further still, it is from this bleeding body of Christ that we see her accused literally emptying out Hell:

Behold and see the virtue of this precious plenty of his dearworthy blood! It descended down into Hell and burst their bonds and delivered them, all who were there who belong to the court of heaven. The precious plenty of his dearworthy blood overflows all the earth and is ready to wash all creatures of sinne who are of good will, have been, and shall be. The precious plenty of his dearworthy blood ascends up into heaven in the blessed body of our lord Jesus Christ, and there is in him, bleeding, praying for us to the Father, and is and shall be as long as we need. (Julian of Norwich, 2015, pp 21)

Moreover, Julian shows directly how it is possible to escape from the ‘one-blunder’ – a term I shall expand on later – through an encounter with the speaking body and through into a Love in the Real, which is synonymous with the field of invention.

For Bauerschmidt, we can suggest that Julian is a mystic who, in their encounter with their own Sinthome, goes beyond affectivity and negative contemplation. She is a mystic who exists beyond the apophatic and cataphatic by focusing on the *negative fullness of Christ's body*. [7] And how her own encounter with this opaque body leads to the creation of her own *Sinthome* [8] of 'all shall be well,' an injunction that was basically impossible and incomprehensible in her own context:

[for Julian] Jesus crucified body is the concrete reality to which she clings for solace and the mysterious hieroglyph that she insistently probes and questions. It is a body whose mysteries seem beyond articulation, not because it is beyond words (for it is precisely as the Word of God that Jesus is crucified), but because in the image of the crucified Julian is presented with what Paul calls the *logos tou staurou* (1 Cor.1:18), which may be read as both 'the word of the cross' and 'the crucified word,' God's disarticulated eloquence. (Bauerschmidt, 1999, p. 51)

Julian's encounter with the body operates as a kind of opaque point that constantly invites endless inventive interpretation:

For Julian, what she sees-Christ's body is like an inexhaustible detailed landscape that requires more than a lifetime to comprehend, and her subsequent interpretation of what she saw is always more seeing, by which the revelation is shown again and again 'with more fullness in light of his precious love.' (Bauerschmidt, 1999, p. 49)

For Bauerschmidt, Julian's encounter with the Body of Christ becomes a nodal point by which one becomes part of a wider community through an interpretative encounter that creates a social bond:

It is Jesus's crucified body that Julian 'reads' as her revelatory text; what is primary *is not the subjective response* aroused by meditation on Christ's body, but the message of Love that is revealed there. In this [...] understanding of Christ's body, *Julian moves away from the experiential emphasis of affective piety, yet we shall see that she does not succumb to the 'contemplative' [apophatic] temptation to consign all that is sensual to merely a preparatory stage of prayer...* [Moreover] we see this Love displayed not simply as an individual's consolation amidst the brute forces of a heartless world, *but as the social bond that grounds 'the lyfe of alle mankind that shalle be savyd.'* (Bauerschmidt, 1999, p. 36)

Proceeding with a Sinthomatic analysis must be seen as a clinical response to the forms of subjectivity that come from this globalised totality without limit. Miller argued that the previous era of the paternal metaphor means that it had the security of discontinuity – categories and segmentation of concepts – but in this era, the nosology of psychosis, neurosis and perversion are defunct manifestations of the All. Thus, what takes precedence in a Sinthomatic analysis is a response to the saturating effect of the 'machine of the not-all.' It, therefore, proceeds not through categorisations but via the concept of knotting. The Sinthome is what radically does not work, but it will knot together the body as imaginary, symbolic and real in a way that is specific to that person. Interesting, the knot as a conceptual point was important for Julian of Norwich also:

The soul is preciously knitted to Him in its making by a knot so subtle and so mighty that it is oned into God. In this oneing, it is made endlessly holy. (Julian of Norwich, 2015, p. 80)

However, Lacan believed that the encounter with the Sinthome needs to go beyond pure inward contemplation—a problem he encountered with Joyce. He criticised this in his Seminar 24, which can be interpreted as 'Love is the failure of the one-blunder.' In short, his argument centres on the importance of the creative act and encounter with the Sinthome, *moving from this point outward to create a social structure*.

Another interpretation of this seminar is 'Love is the failure of the One-conscious.' Meaning that our confrontation with the Sinthome and the One'ness of its encounter entails an ethical encounter outward. For Lacan – and like the mystic Julian – this can only happen through an act of Love.



However, this Love should not be understood as pure sentimentalism; it is based on the importance of creating a symbolic structure in which it can take place. For Julian, it is, therefore, political, but for Lacan, it relates to the concept of the School—the necessary place where analysts learn to handle transference and the place for invention.

*Conclusion: A revised letourgia – The work of the School and negativity*

When looking at the work of Pseudo-Dionysius and Nicholas of Cusa, the combinations of negation and affirmation are always set within a structure: a hierarchy. This is a necessary structure that must be transmitted (Hierarchy is a term not invented by some dry scholastic theologian but by the Father of Mystical Theology himself).

And can we not see this traditional apophatic element at work in Lacanian practice today where the One-All-Alone of the analytic act takes place in the Body of the School, thus negating any tendency toward the idiotic (the privatised)? The Millerian concept of the School is one of the distinguishing aspects of its current focus in the analytic community. As Papada states:

The School is ‘the organism in which there is work to be accomplished. It is inseparable from the training to be dispensed.’ The contribution Lacan makes to the formation of analysts is to assert that analysts are not taught and trained by other analysts. There is nothing universal about the analytic discourse. The analytic discourse cannot be taught. Instead, analysts are formed by their own analysis, as Lacan made clear in the proposition of October 9 1967, on the Psychoanalyst of the School.’ One becomes a psychoanalyst through the experience of encountering the real through one’s symptom. (Papada, 2020, p. 6)

The idea of psychoanalysis as a profession cannot be communicated positively in university pedagogy as a build-up of positive experience that makes one an analyst. No, knowledge of psychoanalysis is different from becoming an analyst. On the contrary, it is much more negative than this. The transmission of psychoanalysis is equal to the analysis itself. One becomes an analyst on the completion of their own singular analysis.[9]

Just as an analyst is singular and becomes an analyst through their own analysis, so the operation of the School operates not like a normal community but through a singularity. As Miller explains, ‘there is no exception, but rather an ensemble, or rather a series of exceptions, of solitudes incomparable to each other...the school is Not-All in the sense that it is logically inconsistent and presents itself in the form of a series in which a law of formation is missing’ (In Papada, 2021).

Reflecting on this, Tassara states:

[the School reflects] the productive *docta ignorantia* Lacan took from took from Nicholas of Cusa, a thirteenth-century German philosopher and theologian. In opposition to crass ignorance, *docta* refers to a wise ignorance, which is situated in the juncture between knowing and not-knowing. (Tassara, 2020, p. 63)

The question of non-knowledge and ignorance is central to the experience of the School. *The analyst is defined by his passion for ignorance.* This non-knowledge – something intricately linked to the mystical tradition – should be distinguished from the Bataillan notion of non-knowledge, which Lacan has always tried to distinguish. For Lacan, this is not to be confused with the experience of ineffable affective alterity. Instead, it is primarily structural and defined with a craft; work — a use of cultivated ignorance *put to work in the structure of the analytic setting to create the field of invention.*[10]

And what is this analytic identity that comes from the School's not-all? It is a non-identity. It is an attestation of a desire that is – ultimately – negative by saying what has been stripped away. As Brousse states:

Passing from analysand to analyst is to mobilise the logic of the not-all, a plunge into the unknown. Homophonic in French, you may read this as you will: 'un' or 'One.' In fact, it is a matter of agreeing to occupy that place which J.-A Miller, in his 2007-2008 course, characterised as the *place de plus personne*— the place of no-one anymore. The void, the null....Noting here that truth is related to Jouissance he proposed, 'the truth says of itself *je me demens, je demens, je me defile, je me defends* —I'm ducking, I'm dodging, I'm flitting, I'm fending off.' (Brousse, 2022, p. 66)

And as these candidates are speaking, the analysts of the Jury listen to a change in speech. They listen to rhythms and repetitions *that show a transformation: a negative shift that says all that is left is a body and a 'mark. It is to identify as waste, surplus, outside phallic systems of value'* (J.-A. Miller, 1989). Ultimately, an analysis aims at a form of subjectivity *that has become a positivised void*. They are left with the bare essentials for inventing fictions—new ways of situating themselves in the social bond.

In the final instance, the 'full apophasis' of the psychoanalytic, like traditional negative theology, is about the possibility of creating a structure, not a singular positive experience, in a world that horrifically saturates us with false positives.

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## Notes:

[1] 'Mysticism' is a modern term that appeared well before the term 'mystical.' It has connotations of changed inward states and religious experience, while the earlier term – related to mystical theology – did not have this experientialist focus.

[2] This transition to the 'affective' has its roots in the Western Christian tradition as 'affective Dionysianism,' as we can see in the work of Thomas Gallus, which had an influence on the Victorines with their emotional understanding of divine receptivity as opposed to a divine form of epistemic unknowing. This 'affective' strand is eventually passed down through the west until finally, we come to the psychologization of the mystical with the work of William James. He argued that religion's root is a private, affective, emotional experience of the divine on which institutional, linguistic, and intellectual elements are bolted as secondary phenomena.

Much work has been undoing this misapprehension of the apophatic as synonymous with the affective. We see this in the work of Andrew Louth, Peter Tyler, and Denys Turner. They argue that the mystical concept – in short – is not being given the negative weight that it is due because of this psychologization.

[3] This idea is something that Wilfried Ver Eecke follows in his work *Denial, Negation, and the Forces of the Negative*, which makes a comparison and reading of the role of the negative in the work of Freud and Hegel. For Hegel, negation plays a crucial role in the unfolding of his philosophy, but for Freud, dissolution is central in the mechanisms of denial and repression. However, Ver Eecke argues that negation mediates toward the absolute spirit in Hegel and individuation in Freud.

Moreover, we also see this in the work of Mari Ruti with her focus on the need to recover the sense of healing in structural psychoanalytic perspectives. She believes that the heuristic of constitutive lack – although crucially important – can leave one cold to existential agony. Of course, negativity is central in articulating contradictions in power systems and the formation of subjection/subjectivity, but psychoanalysis – in its original Freudian conception – is a practice of healing; it aims toward making sense of the negative, of sublimating it.

[4] But also – I think – the more interesting negation regarding Lacan is his negation as a clinician. Indeed, if you look at the anglophone reception of Lacan, it's almost as if his radical negativity can only exist in critical theory and a kind of dispersal amongst the humanities. Yet, when it comes to pure analysis – clinical analysis, the training of analysts – his presence exists beyond intellectual curiosity in France and Brazil, and to a lesser extent, Ireland. Why? It is no coincidence that these countries are also Catholic; Catholicism being home to western mystical tradition; a symbolic that was pre-determined for Lacan's radical work of un-saying and negation as therapy.

[5] In his work *The Psychoanalytic Mystic*, Michael Eigen is a primary example. He argues that pleasure and desire as positive manifestations protect us from Jouissance. Jouissance – for Eigen – becomes a kind of arch-affectivism, a sea of wordless feeling. Apart from creating a common conflation that many scholars do when it comes to overusing the term for Eigen, it almost becomes an affective meta-language, a pleasure greater than pleasure itself that involves a leaving behind of things for a sublime wordless *private* experience. However, as soon as we present Jouissance as an 'affective grounding' of any kind – it does not matter how dark and radical it is – we are operating in the positive realm of what Lacan called phallic Jouissance.

Another example of this affective approach to a positivised absence is found in the work of Amy Hollywood in her mystical theological work *Sensible Ecstasy*. She argues that the distinction between the poles of phallic Jouissance and other Jouissance are to do with experiences of unitive religious experience and experiences of fragmentation. The latter, for Hollywood, is synonymous with the feminine mystic. Again, this framing within an affective framework locks it in a logic of phallic Jouissance, even if framed in negative language.

[6] The letter is the first mark on the body that instantiates language. The analytic act involves confronting this letter.

[7] A neologism that means speaking-being invented by Lacan.

[8] Indeed, the idea of a signifier cut off from context directly applies to Julian for Bauerschmidt argues that the audience for who she was writing her work is strangely absent. She says that her work has yet to be performed.

[9] The process of identification means identifying oneself as an analyst to an inverted jury—inverted in that it is not made up only of the qualified but of unqualified analysands, who vouch for the candidate's transformation. The candidate's identity will be ascertained by listening to an account of what they deem a successful analysis.

[10] Miller expands on this form of non-knowledge and shows how its apophatic operation needs to be distinguished from the common usage we usually attribute to it today in terms of the affective. Reflecting on this subtle operation of Jouissance so as not to lock it within a primary affective interpretation, Lacan said in seminar 23 that the 'real sets fire to everything, but the real is cold. The fire that burns hot is really a mask of the real. The real must be sought elsewhere on the side of absolute 0. This zero is mentioned to separate it from the Freudian conception of libido linked to the positivism of the era. There is a warning here for analysts not to get caught up in the realm of the affect when interpreting Jouissance. The 'hot fire' is a mask of the real means that to get caught up in the affect is to misrecognise its operation. Miller, in his seminar in the Analysts Banquet explains that to navigate the 'confusion of the zero' to access the function of non-knowledge, which is necessary for an analysis, then 'it is necessary to, first of all, emphasise the non, not to remain ignorant about the non, and without going so far as to say that negation does not exist, to be attentive to the modalities of negation.' He then explains that to explain this modality of negation, it is crucial that one does not get caught up in its pathological presentation, what is known as the horror of the real as we confront it in the singularity of an analytic case. Hence, he sets out a way of transcribing it in a transmissible and propaedeutic structure.

**Bio:**

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