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Halpern - Creation: Lacan in Kansas - JCRT 2.1

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Jacques Lacan did not, to my knowledge, ever visit Kansas. But this essay will take him on a brief albeit posthumous journey there. More specifically, I want to examine Lacan's views on creationism, as developed in his seventh seminar *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, and apply them to an understanding of so-called "creation science" as espoused by certain American fundamentalist Protestant sects today.¹ Creation science broke into the news when the Kansas State Board of Education, now dominated by proponents of creationism, voted in 1999 to drop evolutionary theory from the lists of topics on which high school students are tested. While the national news media predictably shuddered at this event, they should not have been surprised. A 1997 Gallop poll determined that only 10% of Americans accept the Darwinian theory of evolution, while 44% believe that human beings were created directly by God less than 10,000 years ago, and 39% believe in a kind of theist amalgam, holding that human beings did evolve slowly from animals but under the guidance of a divine hand. The ongoing cultural contest between evolutionist and creationist thought presents a useful case study, I believe, for the intersection of religion and psychoanalysis. It is, moreover, directly relevant to Lacan's endorsement of creationist modes of thought, since he contrasts these favorably with the theory of evolution, about which he has some initially surprising things to say.

One can see what Lacan wants to say, but what he actually claims is surprising, to say the least. Creation strikes him as less metaphysical than evolution, because the latter is linear and teleological while the former involves a moment of absolute discontinuity (between the symbolic and the real) in the formation of a conscious subject, thus assuring that consciousness (and hence a Creator) are not there from the beginning. But of course, even the version of evolutionary theory prevalent at mid-century (prior, that is, to the development of such patently discontinuous concepts as punctuated equilibrium) did not view evolution as a continuous process, much less a teleological one. This is just the sort of thing that sets Alan Sokol's mouth watering, and for good reason. For my part, I honestly cannot tell if Lacan simply misunderstands the science or is playing a subtle game. In the latter case, his strategy may make more sense if we look at the cultural reception of evolutionary theory in France at the time of the Seventh Seminar.

What holds for monotheist doctrine holds as well for psychoanalytic or evolutionary doctrine: the transmission of a rationalist message traces the path of darkness or obscurity. If the Thing requires the Law to live (as Lacan argues, paraphrasing St. Paul), it is conversely true that the Law requires the Thing. It may therefore be the case that the obscurantism which Darwinists deplore in their opponents is the necessary but often misrecognized precondition for the propagating of their own viewpoint. Thus it is that the debate between creationists and evolutionists does not (ironically enough) evolve but returns inevitably to the same place, the empty place of the Thing.

3. Before turning to our current American context, however, I want to describe Lacanian creationism and place it in *its* cultural context, without which it is apt to be misunderstood. In the Seventh Seminar, Lacan develops his distinctive concept of the Thing, or *das Ding*, that "beyond" of the pleasure principle whose unbearable, terrible Good is also an Evil. For Lacan, the Thing is so exterior (yet so intimate) to the logic of the subject that it is not even repressed; it is rather "a primordial function which is located at the level of the initial establishment of the gravitational center of the unconscious *Vorstellungen*" (62), thereby orienting the field of

¹Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960*, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992).

the real for the subject. As the lost object around which “the whole field of the *Vorstellungen* turns,” *das Ding* cannot itself be represented, nor can it appear directly. It manifests itself only as the virtual center around which the *Vorstellungen* revolve. In this sense, “the Thing only presents itself to the extent that it becomes word,” that is, only as a function of the network of signifiers that circle around it (55-57).

4. Lacan defines sublimation in a way that follows directly from this. “The object is elevated to the dignity of the Thing as we define it in our Freudian topology insofar as it is not slipped into but surrounded by the network of *Ziele*” (112). While Freudian sublimation deflects the drive from a sexual to a non-sexual aim, Lacanian sublimation removes the object of the drive from the system of aims (*Ziele*) entirely, placing it instead at that empty gravitational center which is the Thing. This newly “aimless” object already recalls the Kantian definition of the artwork, and Lacan illustrates the process of sublimation almost exclusively with examples of literary and visual art. The very first extended example of sublimation cited in the seminar is Jacques Prévert’s collection of empty, interlocked matchboxes. By being joined in a (potentially) infinite but pointless series, these formerly useful objects become “wholly gratuitous, proliferating, superfluous, and quasi-absurd” (114). Lacanian sublimation thus pushes Kantian purposelessness to its surrealist limit; its perfect embodiment might well be the Duchampian ready-made. Yet for Lacan, *all* art incorporates a void which signifies its approach to the Thing: “This thing will always be represented by emptiness, precisely because it cannot be represented by anything else’or more exactly, because it can only be represented by something else. But in every form of sublimation, emptiness is determinative.... All art is characterized by a certain mode of organization around this emptiness” (129-30), whether the literal emptiness of Jacques Prévert’s matchboxes or the vital emptiness of the anamorphic skull (itself a stain or hole in the fabric of representation) in Holbein’s *Ambassadors* (135). It should be noted that the structure of the artwork is homologous to that of the subject, since both are networks of signifiers revolving around the place of the Thing, a place which is empty yet radiates a terrifying *jouissance*.
5. The chapter entitled “On creation *ex nihilo*,” which occurs in the section of the seminar devoted to sublimation, develops this homology. One of the chapter’s aims is to show how a created object, a human artifact, can come to represent the Thing. Another is to show how the subject is modified by the advent of a symbolic order which is nevertheless itself a purely human creation. Thus the chapter examines the work of art as a signifier shaped by human activity and, simultaneously, posits the human subject as itself a kind of artifact, a vessel or pot formed by the hand of the creator. Sublimity is clearly at play in “On creation *ex nihilo*,” which combines a disquisition on the Heideggerian Thing with the narrative of divine creation in Genesis. Lacan’s paradigm for creation is the fashioning of a vessel or “vase,” his counterpart to the jug in Heidegger’s famous essay, “The Thing.” Distinguishing between the vase’s “signifying function and its use as a utensil,” Lacan argues that the vase “is in its signifying essence a signifier of nothing other than signifying as such, or in other words, of no particular signified.” Moreover, “this nothing in particular that characterizes its signifying function is that which in its incarnated form characterizes the vase as such. It creates the void and thereby introduces the possibility of filling it.” (120). So the vase’s physical emptiness, the void which it creates by surrounding it, allegorizes its own status as empty signifier, a signifier of nothing. A vase is created *ex nihilo* insofar as it is organized around the emptiness at its center, and in this regard it is like any other artwork, “an object made to represent the existence of the emptiness at the center of the Real that is called the Thing” (121). Yet as Lacan says,

the vase also “creates the void”; thus it is not only creation *from* nothing but (even more fundamentally) creation *of* nothing, since the void that is the vase’s void cannot precede it. Once again the vase allegorizes signification as such, insofar as “the fashioning of the signifier and the introduction of a gap or a hole in the real is identical” (121). The real is a plenum which does not allow of absence or loss; only a symbolic system can incise the real, divide it up and offer the emptiness of an unfilled slot or position. Lacanian creation thus offers a photographic negative of divine creation in Genesis, since it opens a void from within the fulness of the real. It is, however, very much like Blakean creation as described in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: “But first the notion that man has a body separate from his soul, is to be expunged; this I shall do, by printing in the infernal method, by corrosives, which in Hell are salutary and medicinal, melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite that was hid.”² Blake’s image of writing or poetic creation as the eating away or annihilation of matter refers both to his somewhat antiquated technique of “relief etching,” in which acid or burin cut directly into copper plates, and to the corrosive of satire.³ I cite Blake here not only because he illustrates Lacan’s creation *of* nothing but because Blake’s concept of an evil Creator, as embodied in Urizen, touches on another issue of importance. For after developing his version of Genesis in which the creator creates his vessel and declares it good, Lacan turns to the Christian sect known as the Cathars, who consider the creation of the physical world to be an evil. By interlacing orthodox and heterodox creation myths, Lacan restores to creation the irreducible ambivalence which results from its centering on the Thing.

6. Lacan’s portrait of creation *ex nihilo* is laced with paradox. While the concept would seem to reinforce the marriage of religious and psychoanalytic themes in the Seventh Seminar, Lacan insists that “the creationist perspective is the only one that allows one to glimpse the possibility of the radical elimination of God” (213). He continues:

It is paradoxically only from a creationist point of view that one can envisage the elimination of the always recurring notion of creative intention as supported by a person. In evolutionist thought, although God goes unnamed throughout, he is literally omnipresent. An evolution that insists on deducing from continuous process the ascending movement which reaches the summit of consciousness and thought necessarily implies that that consciousness and that thought were there at the beginning. It is only from the point of view of an absolute beginning, which marks the origin of the signifying chain as a distinct order and which isolates in their own specific dimension the memorable and the remembered, that we do not find Being [*l’être*] always implied in being [*l’être*], the implication that is at the core of evolutionist thought (213-214).

7. During the late 1940s and the 1950s, the most successful popularizers of evolutionary thinking in France were religiously minded. In 1947, for example, Pierre Lecomte du Noüy published his book *Human Destiny*, a bestseller in both France and the U.S. Lecomte’s version of evolutionary thinking “posited a special line of ascent to our own species, pointed to a metaphysical urge (‘telefinalism’) driving this line, and offered ‘proof’ that life could not emerge behind blind

²William Blake, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake, Newly Revised Edition*, ed. David Erdman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 39.

³W. T. J. Mitchell, *Blake’s Composite Art: A Study of the Illuminated Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 41; Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), 200.

chance. And God's will hovered over all."⁴ Lecomte argued, moreover, that evolution shifted in mankind from a physical to a psychological plane. "And psychological evolutionism is expressed mainly by the improvement of abstract, moral, and spiritual ideas.... its goal is the realization of a morally perfect being, completely liberated from human passions'egotism, greed, lust for power'hereditary chains, and psychological bondage."⁵ Not the sort of thing, obviously, that would much appeal to Lacan. Even more influential than Lecomte's book, though expressing roughly comparable notions, were the voluminous writings of the Jesuit theologian and paleontologist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. In the France of the late 1950s, then, evolutionary thought would have been connected with an ideology of what one might call Catholic ameliorism, one that was strongly religious and teleological. Lacan's assessment of evolutionism must be understood, then, at least partly against this popular backdrop. Instead of trying to rescue evolutionist thought from its theological captivity, however, Lacan chooses the more paradoxical tactic of borrowing creationism for the purposes of atheism, thus completing the inversion of values begun by Lecomte and Teilhard.

8. Having situated Lacan's creationism in *its* cultural context, I now want to apply it to ours, where evolutionary and creationist thought find themselves locked in a struggle that exhibits a fundamentally imaginary logic of opposition and mirroring. I should say before beginning that the actual battle lines are rather complex. Creation science, for instance, does not denote a simple, clearly marked position. Creationist literature extends from the work of the rational if misguided biochemist Michael J. Behe to the insane rantings of fundamentalist ministers like the Reverend Tim La Haye, co-founder of the Moral Majority. Likewise, some scientists find evolutionary theory perfectly compatible with their own religious beliefs. Nevertheless, some broad strokes can legitimately be drawn.
9. Fundamentalist creationist science explicitly endorses the biblical narrative of creation *ex nihilo*. And yet, the creationist view of evolution paints the latter in a way that recalls Lacanian creation. For what marks evolutionary theory in the eyes of its religious antagonists is the emptiness at its core, the absent space of the Creator. Perhaps the most telling metaphorical expression of this emptiness is to be found in the title of Michael Behe's book, *Darwin's Black Box*.⁶ Black box is a term of art from computer science, denoting any unanalyzed device into which input is fed and output is retrieved. For most of us the desktop computer is a black box, since we employ it without any real idea of how it works. By Darwin's black box, Behe refers to the fact that evolutionary theory works at the level of gross anatomy but fails to consider the complex biochemical processes from which functional and morphological adaptations arise. Behe maintains that biochemical systems exhibit what he calls irreducible complexity and therefore could not have been produced through piecemeal mutations in less complex systems. Living things, he concludes, therefore had to be designed by an intelligent creator.
10. While Behe attaches the metaphor of the black box specifically to the problems of biochemical process, it also seems to suggest a more general set of gaps in the explanatory mechanisms of evolutionary theory. When Behe opens the black box, what he finds inside is God. Darwinian theory thus works like Lacanian creationism in that it is, from Behe's perspective, the artificial creation of nothing or the *nihil* from within the plenitude of a divine real. For the less urbane wing of the creationist camp, this theological void is also a moral one. If life is a

⁴M. Ruse, *From Monad to Man: The Concept of Progress in Evolutionary Biology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 200.

⁵P. Lecomte du Noüy, *Human Destiny* (New York: D. McKay, 1947), 224-25.

⁶M. Behe, *Darwin's Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

blind process of mutation and selection without divine goal or governance, they argue, then moral law lacks any transcendent basis. Hence the teaching of evolution has been blamed by creationists for, among other evils, Communism, Naziism, feminism, racism, divorce, abortion, homosexuality, and “rampant venereal disease.”⁷ Congressman Tom de Lay interestingly upped the ante when he held the teaching of evolutionary theory partly responsible for the shootings at Columbine High School in Colorado. What the creationists thus dimly perceive in the void created by evolutionary theory is precisely the Lacanian Thing, or in other words a limitless and destructive *jouissance*. As the Rev. Tim La Haye puts it, “The humanist doctrine of evolution has naturally led to the destruction of the moral foundation upon which this country was originally built. If you believe that man is an animal, you will naturally expect him to live like one. Consequently, almost every sexual law that is required in order to maintain a morally sane society has been struck down by the humanists, so that man may follow his animal appetites.”⁸ Creationist Henry Morris similarly asks “Since animals are indiscriminate with regard to partners in mating, and since men and women are believed to have evolved from animals, then why shouldn’t we live like animals?”⁹ In the creationist imaginary, animals embody the dangerous *jouissance* of the Thing, and Darwinism, by locating human beings on a continuum with animals, also places them into a terrifying proximity with the Thing. Lacan’s at times somewhat Nietzschean analysis of Christian morality reveals it to be precisely a form of *ressentiment* on the part of the subject when faced with the inaccessible *jouissance* of the Other. The abject terror expressed by creationists in the face of evolutionist thought seems to incorporate both desire and jealousy in the presence of a *jouissance* which is at once frighteningly proximate and irreducibly distant.

11. I do not wish to suggest, however, that only the creationist side of the debate engages in imaginary formations of the kind I have described here. For the portrait of creationists painted by Darwinians also enacts a form of sublimation by raising *its* object to the place of the Thing. Creationists are seen by evolutionists as deluded, hate-filled yahoos, throwbacks to a pre-enlightenment mentality. They thus occupy a position in a narrative of cultural evolution similar to that of apes in a narrative of species evolution. To Darwinians, in other words, it is creationists who possess a destructive *jouissance*, which raises the question of whether Darwinian attempts to enlighten their opponents might not also attempt to deprive them of this *jouissance*, and thus constitute another version of *ressentiment*. This parallel in fantasy between the two sides holds even if, as I would maintain, the creationist view of Darwinists is mostly inaccurate while the Darwinian view of creationists is mostly accurate.
12. But is this mirroring necessary or merely contingent? Does the fact that one side seems unable to vanquish the other speak to an accident of culture or to some deeper logic binding the two sides? Some light may be thrown on this question by Lacan’s reading of Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism*. In the latter work, Freud divides the biblical Moses into two historical figures: one an Egyptian, a follower of the monotheist religion of Akhenaton, and the other a Midianite, the prophet of an obscure volcano god. For Lacan, these two figures respectively embody the symbolic and the real. He comments:

We have the dissociation between the rationalist Moses and the inspired, obscurantist Moses, who is scarcely ever discussed. But basing his argument on the examination

⁷Nell Segraves, cited in R. Numbers, *The Creationists* (New York: Knopf, 1992), 285.

⁸T. La Haye, *Battle for the Mind* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1980), 64.

⁹H. Morris, *The Troubled Waters of Evolution* (San Diego: Creation-Life Publishers, 1974), 67.

of historical evidence, Freud finds no other path adapted to the transmission of the rationalist Moses' message than that of darkness; in other words, this message is linked through repression to the murder of the great Man. And it is precisely in this way, Freud tells us, that it could be transmitted and maintained in a state of efficacy that can be historically measured (174).

- Introduction - Julia Reinhard Lupton, University of California Irvine.
- Revelation - Kenneth Reinhard, University of California Los Angeles & Julia Reinhard Lupton, University of California at Irvine.
- Redemption - Gregg Lambert, Syracuse University.

Notes

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