

Subjectification, Salvation, and the Real in Luther and Lacan¹

CARL RASCHKE

I AM HONORED TO be invited to give a presentation at this important workshop which links the thought of the German theologian Martin Luther, the burning brand that ignited the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, and the French psychoanalyst/philosopher Jacques Lacan, that smoldering bed of embers from which flamed the intellectual revolution of the late twentieth century we now know as “postmodernism,” and to which I myself in a book published not quite a decade ago referred as “the next Reformation.” While the connection between Luther and Lacan was not obvious to me before I was invited to participate in this workshop, on months of reflection and actual writing I have now come to the conclusion that Prof. Westerink’s idea for a topic is amazingly prescient, to say the least.

I will not bore you in this presentation with a lot of technical analysis and exploration of what Lacan meant, or what people believe he meant, with his many operative terms and turns of phrase with which many of, at least in the academic world, are now quite familiar. Nor will I spend too much time on the particulars and historical situatedness of Luther’s theological sayings and writings. I have to confess that at one time in graduate school I had fantasies about becoming a Reformation scholar with special attention to Luther, not only because I was baptized as a baby in a German Lutheran church in Philadelphia attended by my great aunt, the last living

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descendant of the generation that emigrated to the United States in the 1870s. But because as a uniquely American *indignado*—the term currently in fashion in Europe for protesters—in the 1960s, I devoured the writings of Luther and identified with his personality and his cause. We all know that Luther did not really write “theology” in the sense that the term is used in the academic context today. What he did was defend a stance that came to be known in Latin as *sola fide*, “by faith alone,” and undertook this defense through the development of a “theological language,” or a *façon parler*, that spoke decisively from the standpoint of faith and embodies the voice of the faithful believer, who responds to the “word of faith” we know as Scripture. Faith was what Lacan would call Luther’s “place” from which his speech (*parole*) begins. Likewise, Lacan was not a psychoanalyst in the professional sense any more than Luther was a theologian. His “place” was what could be summed up as the truth of “becoming a subject,” not exactly in the way Kierkegaard meant it, but close enough.

But my task here is not to compare Luther and Lacan overall as towering intellectual figures that rightfully have a place now in our own Western legacy. I want to concentrate on what is common among these two giants, but at the same time unique within the “tradition,” as we call it. And what is common is the way in which they both challenge our habit of talking about God, which common religious believers and professional theologians routinely do, rather than our understanding “God” not so much as a noun, but as a form of address, an address to “the Other.”

One of the cardinal elements of both Lutheran and what is broadly called “Reformation Theology” is the doctrine of *pro me*, namely, that the Incarnation of God in Christ expresses not God’s aseity but his *essentially* relational character. This relational nature of God is expressed in the very Hebraic representation of humanity itself. God created us “in his image,” and the image itself is ultimately relational. Like *theos*, *anthropos* is ontologically constituted as a relationship, an intimate relationship between the sexes which expresses their intimate relationship to God. “And man created human beings in the image of God; male and female he created them.” As Karl Barth famously observed, the phrase *imago Dei* signifies an *analogia relationalis* rather than an *analogia entis*.² For Luther, however, the intimacy of the God-humanity relationship—not to mention the intimacy of the man-woman relationship—is compromised by sinfulness. Following Paul in Romans, Luther stresses how the relationship is exacerbated by the seemingly insurpassable distance between a Holy God and an unrighteous subject revealed through the Law. It is only the Gospel, disclosing dialectically

2. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III.2 (New York: T. & T. Clark, 1958) 323–24.

that Christ died for us on the cross rather than allowing us to be annihilated in the presence of God on account of sin, that allows us to experience the full sense of a restored primordial relationship. In other words, Christ *as* God did not “die” in himself, but singularly “for me,” in order to re-establish my participation in the ontological relationship that is humanity as *imago Dei*. Both the Christian God and the Christian idea of the essential nature of humanity is predicated on a “subject-object split” presenting us with a profound dialectical dilemma. In Continental philosophy we term such a dilemma an *aporia*, an “undecidable.” This *aporia* amounts to what John Calvin called the “incapacity” (*non capax*) of the finite for the infinite. As Luther essentially argues in his *Commentary on Galatian* (while) again citing Paul, the Pharasaic way beyond this *aporia* is to privilege the language of the infinite, the revelation of the Law that articulates “righteousness” in terms of an impossible canon of measure. But the language of the gospel affirms that the dialectic of the possible and impossible has now been resolved in Christ’s death and satisfaction for sin.

What is the “Gospel” (*Evangelium* in German, *evangelion* in Greek), according to Luther? The tendency of Luther’s theological interpreters has been to reify it. Furthermore, this tendency itself is supported by Luther’s own predilection, exceeding the original meaning in Paul’s text, toward contrasting “law” and “gospel” as if they were simple semiotic, or conceptual, antitheticals. However, In the commentary Luther shows that he is attuned to the original set of significations for the word, and that he understands it as a mode of discourse concerning salvation, a form that constitutes in its syntactical intricacy a coming-to-truth of the “revelation” that we are saved by “faith alone” in the final efficacy of Christ’s death on the cross. In the opening portions of the commentary Luther focuses on Paul’s grounding of his own authority in the “revelation” of Christ he received on the road to Damascus and its ramifications in his concomitant “call” to serve as an apostle. Luther underscores how Paul’s “call,” or “appointment,” by God to become the “apostle to the Gentiles” is integrally associated with the trajectory of his testimony that manifests the “truth” of the Gospel of Christ Jesus itself. “The call is not to be taken lightly. For a person to possess knowledge is not enough. He must be sure that he is properly called. Those who operate without a proper call seek no good purpose.”³ Luther compares every divine calling in Christ with this authorization of the trajectory of truth in Scripture. “We exalt our calling, not to gain glory among men, or money, or

3. Martin Luther, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians*, e-book (Boston: MobileReference, 2009) 71.

satisfaction, or favor, but because people need to be assured that the words we speak are the words of God.”⁴

Later in the commentary Luther exalts the “truth” of the Gospel over doctrine and traditions, which he compares to the Pauline reading of “law.” “I too may say that before I was enlightened by the Gospel, I was as zealous for the papistical laws and traditions of the fathers as ever a man was. I tried hard to live up to every law as best I could.”⁵ How do we construe, then, the difference between Law and Gospel, so far as they function semantically and not as simple, familiar, Protestant theological word pairings? “The New Testament expression “false apostle” epitomizes that discourse which purports to parallel the compact, singular truth contained in Paul’s original “revelation,” but on consideration and methodical exposition turns out to betray its own promise. In contemporary parlance we can say that if we read both discourses “deconstructively,” we end up with one that returns to the singular semantics of the Damascus road experience and the other that discloses itself as idle and empty. Luther recounts his own life as the ultimate testament to the fecklessness of the “law” of doctrine and the saving power of the gospel. “I crucified Christ daily in my cloistered life, and blasphemed God by my wrong faith. Outwardly, I kept myself chaste, poor, and obedient. I was much given to fasting, watching, praying, saying of masses, and the like. Yet under the cloak of my outward respectability I continually mistrusted, doubted, feared, hated, and blasphemed God. My righteousness was a filthy puddle.”⁶ As those who are familiar with Luther’s life, he is referencing here his prior way of approaching the content of scripture, informed by the quasi-scholastic, exegetical procedures that derived in many respects from Aristotle’s *Topics* and *Prior Analytics*. Scholastic exegesis relied on several approaches. However, the most important one was the so-called *collationes*, “talks” or “conferences” on the meaning of certain passages by a learned doctor, who took Scripture itself and explained it in light of what had been said before. The output was what Aquinas called “sacred doctrine,” an enhanced version of the Biblical text with normative commentary, similar but not necessarily comparable to the formation of the Jewish Talmud.

As historians of Christian exegesis routinely note, the Schoolmen rarely distinguished between the original text and what the authorities, ancient or more recent, said about the text.⁷ Indeed, the *scholia* carried equal weight

4. Ibid., 84.

5. Ibid., 433.

6. Ibid., 446.

7. See Eduard Reuss, *History of the Sacred Scriptures of the New Testament*, trans. Edward L. Houghton (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1884) 2:555ff.

to the originals. Furthermore, the relevance of the text—whether original or annotated—to an individual’s own personal faith concerns or struggles, as became the litmus test of later “Reformed” theology, was utterly inconsequential. Biblical texts were treated exegetically in almost in the same way as ancient, pagan philosophical texts (though regarded as having a “sacral-ity” the others lacked). The *scholia* were resource material for the learned *collationes*, which in turn could be integrated sometimes as commentaries themselves that clarified the content of the evolving texts. The *collationes*, of which Peter Abelard’s are perhaps the most famous, often used a combination of argumentation that followed Aristotle’s rules of logic and rhetoric. However, they did not seek at all to bring forth what the later Reformation tradition would designate generically as the “plain” sense of Scripture, as it could be appropriated by a believer.

Luther, in setting a new precedent for interpretation of texts based on his own experiences, turns the ancient project of Christian hermeneutics into an existential challenge. While observing the Augustinian principle of Scriptural interpretation through *inward illumination*, Luther however sets up a dualistic, or dialectical, tension between the reading of the text as either “law” and as “gospel.” The transposition of the legalistic reading into an emancipatory reading of Scripture as the word of salvation, or what we might call a “salvation event,” depends on whether comes to the text with a humble attitude of faith that seeks God’s wisdom (*sapientia*) or through the arrogant presumption of a mainly rational understanding that can be parsed, disputed, and settled through the kind of computative inference (*scientia*) that depends on doctrinal subtlety and established authorities as well as intellectual precedents. Only when one approaches the mysteries of the text with the innocence and openness of faith can the Holy Spirit truly operate, and illumination take place. The work of the Spirit also allows for “law” to be fulfilled, although from the realization that one is already made right, or “justified,” before God through faith. “The real doers of the Law are the true believers. The Holy Spirit enables them to love God and their neighbor.” The “Galatians,” those who turn gospel into law and law into gospel, are the same, like the curia, who “take liberties” with the meaning of Scripture. Truth lies in the realization of language as transformative of the subject. That is the fundamental implication of the statement that God can only be comprehended in his nature as the crucified Christ, as the semantic fulcrum of the gospel as *theologia crucis*, as *pro me*.

But we are concerned here not so much with the intimate particulars of a theology with which every scholar familiar with the history of Protestantism knows at some level. Our task is to give an account, as we indicated at the beginning, of how the transformations that took place in the general

semantic field of seventeenth-century theological discourse as a result of the Lutheran “revelations” on the road from Rome to Wittenberg eventuated in the postmodernist revolution. And we suggested that the decoding mechanism for transposing the message from theology to secular philosophy in the postmodern era is the innovations in psychoanalysis carried through with the work of Lacan. The analogy is not perfect, but the correlations are strong enough to justify this claim. In the same way that Luther’s *sola fide* served to reconfigure the very context of theological discourse by refusing the legitimacy of an exegetical strategy founded on the coherence of propositional reasoning derived from previous clarifications and commentaries, so Lacan’s replaced Freud’s hydraulic model of the instincts with a post-Saussurian adaptation of the *langue/parole* distinction to an analysis of the patient’s discourse. Lacan’s “linguistic turn” was comparable in Heidegger’s “overcoming” (*Überwindung*) of the metaphysical tradition. At the same time, it heralded the kind of “theological turn” we saw in Continental—or at least French—philosophy as early as the late 1980s. In many important respects this latter-day theological turn has amounted to a “turn to the subject,” recapitulating Kierkegaard’s early—and shall we say Lutheran?—dictum of *truth as subjectivity* with minimal differences. Kierkegaard’s rendering of truth as the sidebar of “becoming a subject” parallels Lacan’s “subjectification” through a discourse to the Other stabilized through the skillful intervention of the analyst.

We cannot, and we cannot pretend to, translate Luther’s dialectical theologizing directly into what we might call *Lacan-speak*. But we should observe that the critical Lutheran undecidable of law versus gospel amounts to a curious kind of Lacanian undecidable concerning whether the symbolic order, to which all theology belongs, shall be decipherable psychoanalytically as a discourse that productively results in a truthfulness which the subject acknowledges. In his *Ecrits*, especially in the long and well-known essay entitled “The Function and Field of Speech in Language and Psychoanalysis” that was originally presented as a paper in 1953 and published in 1956, Lacan treats “speech” (*parole*) in much the same manner as Luther regarded the reading of Scripture. As overdetermining symbolic frameworks, both Scripture and language—(*langue*) in the sense of what Wittgenstein had in mind with the expression *Lebensform* (“form of life)—consist in complex conditions of experience and self-understanding that must be slowly and strenuously worked out through elaboration, dialectical interposition, and the difficult interpretations of life’s many twists and pitfalls. As we say in linguistics, every paradigmatics requires not merely a syntagmatics, but its own distinctive *pragmatics*. Both analysis in Lacan and a faithful dedication to the reading of the Word in Luther comprise parallels types of such a

pragmatics. Both also lead not to a *scientia* that masters “structurally” and systematically the text but to an existentially grounded *sapientia* that only the “spirit” can bring forth. The significance of the word “post-structuralism,” which Lacan’s philosophical musings along with his psychoanalytic insights pioneered, hinges on this key distinction.

Interestingly, in the “Function of Speech” Lacan refers to his own re-design of what Freud called “the talking cure” as a form of “exegesis.” Just as Lutheran exegesis leads to the disclosure of the word of the text as the *Word* of assurance and salvation—the transformation of the text as law into the word as gospel—so Lacanian “exegesis” as analytical procedure results in the redemption of the patient from the compulsion of his or her symptoms through an emancipatory reevaluation of one’s own discourse as the language of truth. Lacan describes such a symptom as “the signifier of a signified that has been repressed from the subject’s consciousness. A symbol written in the sand of the flesh and on the veil of Maia, it partakes of language by the semantic ambiguity . . . highlighted in its constitution.”⁸ But its symbolic functioning conceals “the other’s discourse in the secret of its cipher [*chiffre*].” The other’s discourse is coded into “hieroglyphics of hysteria, blazons of phobia, and the labyrinths of *Zwangneurose* [obsessive neurosis],” and so forth. “These are the hermetic elements,” Lacan writes, “that our exegesis resolves, the equivocations that our invocations dissolves, and the artifices that our dialectic absolves, by delivering the imprisoned meaning in ways that run the gamut from revealing the palimpsest to providing the solution [*mot*] of the mystery and to pardoning speech.”⁹ True *parole* is “pardoning” *parole*.

It is here that we should raise a question that stalks not only any contemporary appropriation of Lacan, but also the kind of strategic comparison we are undertaking here. It is similar to Nietzsche’s famous question “who speaks?” which is also the question the whole of Lacanian analysis poses consistently, if only at times indirectly. The question of “who speaks?” embeds the problem of the production of truth in discourse, because if all unconscious discourse, as Lacan asserts, is the other’s discourse, then the aim of analysis—or “exegesis”—is to reconstitute speech as the *discourse of the subject*, and thereby as “true” discourse. But at the same time this transition to true discourse demands that one pose the further question “who pardons?” In the Lacanian venue the pardoning becomes evident through the unfolding, emancipatory discovery of the subject who speaks his way to the site we might designate as “truthfulness.” Speech liberates for Lacan, because it relativizes the pseudo-objectivity of language along with the “law

8. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006) 280.

9. *Ibid.*, 281.

of the father,” while nurturing a space for *one’s own speech* to construct its own rules and protocols, a kind of “grammar of authenticity”. In the Lacanian framework we have too the passage from the hypnotic power of the symbolic order and its various imaginary codings to the recognition of the perdurance and presence of the Real. The words of the Big Other are “deconstructed” and “disseminated” (as Derrida would say) as the heterogeneous, but self-authenticating, genuine words of “true speech.”

In Luther—and generally in Reformation praxis—everything of this order seems perhaps more obvious, though that sense of self-evidence may be more of a mirage than we care to admit. Our first response would be, “well, in theology God pardons.” Not exactly. Luther’s struggle with a “holy and righteous” God who could only condemn us to eternal suffering because of our sin is the fulcrum of the same kind of “dialectic” Lacan outlines. Ironically, this same kind of dialectic is endlessly repeated every Sunday morning in evangelical Christian churches around the world. For Luther, however, it is not God so much as it is “Gospel” *that pardons*. Allow me to make this point by constructing a kind of Lacanian quasi-algebraic, notational function for illustration. The following chain of substitutions among signifiers—the type of device which Lacan repeatedly employs to amplify his dictum that *parole* is primarily metonymy rather than synonymy and which corresponds not just to the Lutheran formula as well as to the core “evangelical” message—is as follows: $f(S) \approx \text{God} \rightarrow \text{Gospel} \rightarrow \text{Death on Cross} \rightarrow \text{Christ} \rightarrow \text{Justification} \rightarrow \text{Assurance of Salvation}$, where S equals “salvation.” Note that “gospel” comes second in the metonymic chain and Christ “as” God comes fourth. Although from a theological standpoint the order would normally be reversed, Luther himself is quite explicit. It is the reading of the Gospel—and the transformation of the inner person through a recognition that we are “justified” *sola fide* despite our inherent sinfulness—that activates our salvation. Christ has already “accomplished” this work through his sacrifice on the Cross—that is, from the standpoint of both history and eternity is already done, *telestai*. But it is only when we become cognizant of this eternal deed through the reading of Scripture and the illumination of the Holy Spirit as to its essential import and significance that we can say confidently that “justification” in its thoroughly personal and inward sense has taken place.

Thus it is the *language* of the Gospel, not the Gospel as *res ipsa*, that provides us with the theological, if not the philosophical, index to the event of salvation. In Luther’s theology of the Word, summarized in the Reformation doctrine of *sola Scriptura* as the semiotic equivalent for a *theologia crucis*, we have both a *prototype* and a *precursor* for the Lacanian reinvention of Freud’s “talking cure” through the struggle of language toward speech,

of discourse in the direction of *truth*. Subjectification and truth-telling are intimately associated with each other in Lacan. Similarly, in Luther the appropriation of the justifying, and thereby “saving,” text of Scripture—the transmutation of Scriptural and theological *langue* into its therapeutic counterpart as *parole*—becomes the basis for an event of subjective appropriation that corresponds to Lacan’s “advent of true speech.”

As Lacan writes, “the function of language in speech is not to inform but to evoke.” Furthermore, “what I seek in speech is a response from the other.”¹⁰ Luther’s biography, especially during the years 1513–1517, demonstrated strongly this Lacanian precept. His overzealousness in utilizing the monastic confessional and penitential system in order to secure a minimal security that might somehow equilibrate God’s “righteousness” with his own led to a personal spiritual crisis that would not only turn his own life upside down but European history as well as thought. For Luther, the abysmal gap between God’s unmeasurable holiness and his own sinful human nature—what would later be encapsulated in the Reformation principle of *finitus non capax infiniti*—stamped on to his own sense of self what Hegel would call the “unhappy consciousness,” the inherent inability to reconcile the balance the equation psychologically as well as theologically.¹¹

10. *Ibid.*, 299.

11. Luther’s well-known dilemma is, of course, the same as Paul’s dilemma, and Paul’s dilemma ultimately, Lacan suggests, serves as a template for modern epistemology starting with Kant. Lacan develops this argument, albeit in his typically allusive vein, in the section of the seminar he calls “On the Moral Law” conducted from 1959–60. That seminar has come to be characterized as an exploration of his “ethics” so far as psychoanalysis is concerned. However, Lacan’s ethics turns out to be more Levinasian than Kantian, insofar as it turns on the question not simply of the kind of “representation” (*Vorstellung*) that can be considered valid as an object of pure reason, but the kind of representation that arises when my desire is confronted with the desire of the Other. Lacan calls this object *das Ding* (“The Thing”), which has not so adventitious resonances with Kant’s *Ding an sich*. *Das Ding* has a certain conjugal connection with Lacan’s *objet petit a*. Briefly stated, the latter can be described as the fantastical (albeit arbitrary) source of desire, the former as the representational locus for all the operations of the symbolic in constructing an imaginary space in perception where the desire of the I (Freud’s *Ich-Lust*) and the desire of the Other can somehow be seen to converge. *Das Ding*, therefore, performs what we might term a “salvific” operation in the conflict of the pleasure and reality principles. It performs the role of “assurance” (Lacan employs the German term *Sicherung*), as the Gospel does for Luther. “It is not just a matter of drawing close to *das Ding*, but also to its effects, to its presence at the core of human activity, namely, in that precarious existence in the midst of the forest of desires and compromises that these very desires achieve with a certain reality, which is certainly not as confused as one might imagine.” Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, VII*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1997) 105.

In the same way, Lacan views the question of *das Ding* as one that arises, as it does for Luther, out of the Pauline paradox of the law and sin. The law that is meant to

This inherent “imbalance” in Luther’s own theological rhetoric, buttressed as biographers have repeatedly pointed out by a combination of his peasant mannerisms and personality and his private revolt against the excesses of the church in its late medieval efforts to inflame the religious imagination with the threat of hell. Luther was also upset at the way in which church had carefully constructed an absurd “economy” of penance through the doctrine of indulgences. Luther’s meticulous reading of the letters of the apostle Paul, therefore, is more than an historical eccentricity. It is pure grist for psychoanalysis.

The pre-eminence among twentieth-century Luther biographies of *Young Man Luther* by the neo-Freudian Harvard clinician Erik Erikson in the late 1950s testifies to this fact. Erikson first published the book in 1958, about the same time Lacan was transitioning from his many early academic essays collected in the *Écrits* to the famous “seminars” that would foster a whole generation of French “post-structuralists” that, in turn, would launch the “postmodernist” revolution in philosophy. Its complete lack of the Lacanian sensibility concerning the role of language in psychoanalysis and its

save creates consciousness of sin. For Lacan explicitly, and for Luther implicitly, it is a question of language. Both “solutions” to the problem revolve around the fact that law (Greek=*nomos*) depends on the *nomothetic* function of language as a system of discursive codings, codings that do not belong within the subjective matrix of desire and its struggle for representation, codings that are *nicht-Ich*, that “condemn,” especially in the negative form that are the Ten Commandments. This “condemnation” of desire through the enforcement of linguistic—and by extension moral—codes forces desire to be “repressed,” that is, as the more precise meaning of Freud’s term *Verdrängnis* implies, to be dislocated, to be partially hidden, to be unable to be enunciated by the subject. In other words, language and lying (just as legalism and hypocrisy) go hand in glove. “The point is that speech doesn’t itself know what it is saying, when it lies, and that, on the other hand, in lying it also speaks some truth” (ibid., 82). For both Luther and Lacan, it is the impossibility of reconciling the representations of desire (what Lacan riffing on Freud calls *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz*) with the “universalizing” requirements of discourse. Hence, the inevitability of the “law” revealing sin, which Lacan in the same section identifies with *das Ding*, which in effect is the “emptiness” of all moral significations of desire. That is why Lacan concludes the opening discussion of *das Ding* with the following observation: “Whatever some may think in certain milieu, you would be wrong to think that the religious authors aren’t a good read. I have always been rewarded whenever I have immersed myself in their works. And Saint Paul’s Epistle is a work that I recommend to you for your vacation reading” (ibid., 83).

For Luther, the Pauline “*aporia*” vanishes when the “language” that “speaks” is my own (Luther=*meine eigene*), when it becomes the redemptive speech of the Gospel that is now within my own “conscience.” It becomes the liberating act of a “sinner” who is not only *peccator* as in a former time, but now a “new person” as *iustus*. For Lacan, the “partial” truth of the speech that is caught up in the lie of the language of the law is emancipated as well through the *Sprachkur*, as a fully enunciating subject. That is why Lacan describes the trajectory that traces the intimate intertwinings of language and desire as “rediscovering the relationship to *das Ding*” as “somewhere beyond the law” (ibid., 84).

focus on a direct psychobiography that simply imposes the classic Freudian topology of id, ego, and superego—or the developmental model of oral, anal, and genital stages—on the life of Luther renders it now intellectually outdated. Yet it is the book's profound contextualization of Luther within the general history of ideas that makes it exceptionally relevant here.

Early in the biography Erikson focuses on the manner in which Ockhamist nominalism played a truly formative role in the shaping of Luther's later philosophical, not to mention his theological, outlook. "Ockham had taught," writes Erikson, "that concepts are only symbols of things and exist only in the act of giving meaning, *in significando*" (that is, in the "act of signifying").¹² Furthermore, according to Erikson, Luther employed this thoroughly anti-Aristotelian and anti-metaphysical theory of signification in undertaking what today we would term the "deconstruction" of the broad Medieval "text" of the salvation process. The result was that Luther himself transitioned from the inherent late Medieval theological habit of reifying God's infinite "justice" as one who wreaks "horrible and accusatory wrath, with man prostrate in his sight," to a Deity who "imputes" his own righteousness to the simple believer reading Scripture and responding in faith. In the "word" that evokes faith, Erikson says, the believer encounters God "face to face, recognizing Him as He would be recognized" and "learning to speak to Him directly."¹³ Here we have the Lacanian characterization without Lacan of the psychoanalytical transaction that lifts language from its pure formality, or status as *langue*, to the spoken response of the subject as one's own "truth," the personal sense of actuality that suddenly emerges from the intersubjective process, which Lacan himself employs as a paradigm of intervention and transference. "The speech value of a language is gauged by the intersubjectivity of the 'we' it takes on."¹⁴

Here, therefore, the ultimate question of the relationship between Luther and Lacan comes to the fore. Both the Lacanian "we" and the Lutheran *testamentum* are marked by the Reformation sign of the *non capax*. The dissymmetrical relationship between discourse and the "other," who also possesses discourse, is made even more extreme by the fact that the speech *de l'autre* constitutes the speech of God, the self-revealer of the divine *logos*, the infinitely productive source of all signification against which "my speech" always measures itself. But it must also inevitably measure itself not only in terms of "distance," but also in terms of *différance*. So if the "subject" of faith

12. Erik Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Norton, 1958) 89.

13. *Ibid.*, 165.

14. Lacan, *Écrits*, 299.

in the Lutheran language world can arrive at its own truth—its *angeeignete Wahrheit*—through speech, it must also “appropriate”—as Kierkegaard would say—God’s self-revelation. What significance does this transaction therefore confer on the infinite Signifier “God”? Luther’s God is both *Deus revelatus* and *Deus absconditus*. In Lutheran terms we might say that God is both the God whose speech becomes “my speech”, that is when he is “revealed” to me because he is always God *für mich* as a subject, and the God who remains “hidden” to me because his signifying capacity outstrips both the finite givenness of the language, or languages, I speak, and the limits of my performance within that language. God is always a cipher for the impossible Pentecost moment. However, for Luther, salvation does not require Pentecost. Salvation only requires that I learn to speak as “my truth” his revealed truth.

In Lacanian psychoanalysis the Lutheran faith-function of standing ready and willing to appropriate God’s truth as my truth corresponds to the *desire-causing function* of the symbolic form that evokes my willingness to talk and eventually arrive at what is “my own.” This desire-causing “object,” always framed within a signifying or symbolized structure of desire itself Lacan refers to as the *objet petit a*. I will not take time here to explore all the vicissitudes of Lacan’s discussion of the meaning of the *objet petit a*, which he refused to specify as a concept, only to formalize as what he termed a pure “algebraic sign” that inscribes a kind of semiotic operation within the movement of subjectification itself. But if there is anything we can say about the *objet petit a*, or “object little a” where a stands for both *autre* in French and *ander* in German, is that it is the most streamlined or most mobile of all Lacanian “sliding signifiers.” In “desiring God” we desire all the shifting and confusing “abductive” (C.S. Peirce’s term) *differentia* within the semiotic structure of how we articulate the desire for salvation. We are reminded of Augustine’s question of what we desire when desire God. To put the matter less philosophically as well as psychoanalytically, and perhaps more “theologically,” we can thus say that God is the ultimate *objet petit a*. God can never be “object Big A” because the pure *jouissance*—in Lacan’s phrasing—of “becoming God” is impossible. We can never have such a God, even if we desire such a God.

Henceforth, all our theological musings and reflections, from Paul to the present, in some ways constitute one extended, two-thousand-year Lacanian session, or seminar. I am not trying to be flippant in this context. If there is anything we can really say about the theological enterprise, especially after Luther, is that it is not about “speaking the truth” but “speaking *our* truth.” That truth is spoken as the assurance of our salvation, which the Holy Spirit illuminates in our souls as both the general and *singular truth of*

Scripture. We tend to believe theology is about language, but is really about speech. That is what we learned from Luther. We can learn much better how to concretize as well as “deconstruct” the entire text of that truthfulness by finally comprehending why truth must always be *said*, not demonstrated. It is not mere happenstance that Lacan regarded himself as an admirer of Heidegger. But that alone is another topic to take up some day. Suffice it to say at this point that we must study Lacan, psychoanalysis, linguistics, and of course post-structuralist explorations of the way in which the sign itself signifies, in order to better comprehend how, as Heidegger says, *die Sprache spricht* (“language speaks”).

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