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Language After God: Nietzsche, Lacan, and the Sinthome of Tragic Wisdom

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Abstract

Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of the "*sinthome*" and Friedrich Nietzsche's tragic philosophy of self-overcoming are deeply complementary theories of linguistic subjectivity, each describing the transformative potential of a kind of art at the centre of the inherently symptomatic experience of language. Lacan's final seminars reimagine the psychoanalytic symptom as the potential site where each subject might forge a *sinthome*: a singular structure of creative agency in the experience of desire and truth. Nietzsche's tragic philosophy works to uncover the problematically aesthetic and creative character of reality, suggesting that one must affirm and cultivate such creativity in order to overcome the tragic character of existence. Examined together, these two theories illuminate each other, as each argues that language is symptomatically plagued by a religious logic of truth which can be overcome only by a radical affirmation of creativity in one's experience of truth and desire.

Keywords

Nietzsche, Lacan, Psychoanalysis, Sinthome, Art, Artifice, Creativity, Desire, Agency.

Summary for Lay Audience

The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan each suggest that human existence is problematically creative at its very core. By considering their thought together, one comes to see that each of them takes the lived experience of language to be plagued by a hidden religious logic. This logic, they argue, is primarily one of identity and permanence; people typically take themselves, the external objects of perception, and the concepts with which they understand such perception to be dependably self-identical. In other words, everyday experience tends towards a straightforwardly objective experience of language and reality. For Lacan and Nietzsche, however, such faith in objectivity is a daydream that masks the status of reality as an artistic process in which one always participates, and for which humanity ultimately bears creative responsibility. Moreover, they each believe that our misunderstanding of truth as an independent order of permanence and objectivity leads to a neurotic paralysis of creativity and agency. Lacan's idea of the "*sinthome*" and Nietzsche's tragic philosophy of "self-overcoming" are deeply complementary theories of how this paralyzing misunderstanding can be cured through the cultivation of a kind of artistic agency in the spheres of truth and desire.

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It was her voice that made
The sky acutest at its vanishing.
She measured to the hour its solitude.
She was the single artificer of the world
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,
Whatever self it had, became the self
That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we
As we beheld her striding there alone,
Knew that there never was a world for her
Except the one she sang and, singing, made.

Wallace Stevens, "The Idea of Order at Key West."

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Chapter One: The Death and Undeath of God in Nietzsche and Lacan

1.1 Introduction: The question of the death of God

Though Friedrich Nietzsche is widely considered to have anticipated some key insights of psychoanalytic theory, and though a good deal of literature has acknowledged and explored his influence on major analysts such as Freud and Jung, connections between Nietzsche and another of the monumental figures in the history of psychoanalysis, Jacques Lacan, have been traced with surprising infrequency. This thesis analyzes the aspects of Nietzsche's and Lacan's teachings that concern the possibility of creativity and freedom in the lived experience of language and desire. The purpose of this analysis is to address the remarkable, but as yet unexplored, connections that can be drawn between Nietzsche's tragic philosophy of self-overcoming and Lacan's theorization of the "sinthome" as complementary antidotes to the fundamentally symptomatic character of language.

As recently as 2006, Silvia Ons observed that "although there are some studies on the link between Freud and Nietzsche, there are no studies so far on Nietzsche and Lacan."¹ In the intervening years the situation has somewhat improved. Currently, there are four published works that stage a significant encounter between Nietzsche and Lacan. These texts take a variety of approaches, ranging from criticism to philosophy and even to advice for the practice of clinical psychoanalysis. Alenka Zupančič pursues the exegesis of a key component of Nietzsche's thought, the transformation of subjectivity

¹ Silvia Ons, "Nietzsche, Freud, Lacan," in *Lacan: The Silent Partners*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (New York: Verso, 2006), 80. At the time of Ons's writing, there already existed one noteworthy exception: Alenka Zupančič, *The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Two* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2003).

embodied by Nietzsche's metaphor of the high noon, through the conceptual lens of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. As such, Zupančič does not argue for the validity of connecting Nietzsche and Lacan so much as she simply demonstrates the validity of this connection by putting it to work. Similarly, but from a decidedly critical vantage point, Joanne Faulkner utilizes Lacanian psychoanalysis to construct a brilliant and challenging critique of Nietzsche around the thesis that Nietzsche "[e]nacts [nefariously] what psychoanalytic theory attempts merely to explain: the subject's assumption of its social function."² While these two texts consist mostly in applying a psychoanalytic framework to Nietzsche, Tim Themi takes a more neutral approach by arguing that certain aspects of Nietzschean and Lacanian thought can be read as deeply complementary and mutually reinforcing; specifically, Lacan's ethics of psychoanalysis (that is, the possibility of an ethical refusal to give up on one's unique desire) and Nietzsche's critique of the tradition of Western metaphysics.³ Finally, Jared Russel, philosopher and practicing psychoanalyst, argues that Nietzsche's teachings can be applied with great benefit to the clinical practice of psychoanalysis, dedicating a full chapter to the incorporation of Nietzschean insights into Lacanian analytic technique.⁴

What all of these works express in common is an understanding that Nietzsche and Lacan share a certain set of diagnostic premises regarding the possibilities (and impossibilities) of desire and creativity insofar as such possibilities are determined by the acquisition and inhabitation of language in lived experience. The nature and stakes of

² Joanne Faulkner, *Dead Letters to Nietzsche: or the Necromantic Art of Reading Philosophy* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010).

³ Tim Themi, *Lacan's Ethics and Nietzsche's Critique of Platonism* (New York: SUNY Press, 2014).

⁴ Jared Russel, *Nietzsche and the Clinic: Psychoanalysis, Philosophy, Metaphysics* (London: Karnac Books, 2017).

these mutual concerns of Nietzsche and Lacan are most poignantly articulable, at least in a preliminary way, in the relation of these thinkers to the crisis of values, desire, and sublimation embodied in the concept of the “death of God.”

Nietzsche’s famous proclamation that “God is dead,” likely his most popular idea, finds its earliest articulation in poetic terms: “Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? ... Are we not continually falling... in all directions? Is there still an up and a down? Aren’t we straying as through an infinite nothing?”⁵ These images suggest a new historical epoch in which the traditional reference points of value and beacons of truth are no longer capable of fixing a horizon of meaning and purpose, such that we are now lost in a total emptiness without direction. Nietzsche’s name for this epoch is the era of nihilism.

The contemporary era of nihilism, for Nietzsche, is not only a period of intense difficulty and risk, but in fact presents humanity with its greatest challenge so far: “Is the magnitude of this deed [of murdering God] not too great for us? Do we not ourselves *have to become gods* merely to appear worthy of it?”⁶ Essentially, Nietzsche treats the crisis of nihilism as a crisis of values that demands humanity relearn its forgotten capacity to *create values*. Hitherto, humanity experienced meaning, value, and purpose as guaranteed, directly or indirectly, by faith in a divine order and consistency of reality. Nietzsche believes that this interpretive organization of human horizons has ultimately malfunctioned and must be creatively overcome, but also that its breakdown threatens the very capacity to create anything that might replace it.

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 120.

⁶ *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

Lacan is hesitant to embrace a certain popular view of the death of God as a liberating event, but his reasons for this prove to be concerns that Nietzsche shares. In the eleventh of Lacan's twenty-seven yearly public seminars on psychoanalysis, which were addressed to the community of practicing psychoanalysts in Paris but attracted increasingly popular audiences as the years progressed, Lacan suggests that "the myth of the *God is dead*... perhaps this myth is simply a shelter against the threat of castration."⁷ I offer a clearer definition of castration below, but for the moment I will suggest that Lacan dismisses the idea that God is dead when it is used to assert a sudden liberation of humanity in the spheres of desire, morality, or subjectivity. Moreover, he believes that people deny the persistent religious logic of language and culture to hide from the real problem: even if God is dead, even if he never existed, the idea of God still functions to arrest and torture the subjectivity and desire of even the most ardent atheist in ways that remain largely unconscious.⁸

Nietzsche and Lacan are in perfect agreement on this caveat to the idea of the death of God. As Zupančič suggests, Nietzsche's thesis is actually twofold: "God is dead" and "Christianity survived the death of God."⁹ The latter thesis means precisely that the cultural logic, morality, psychology, and metaphysics associated with Christian faith in God survive, even though the idea of God has become less consciously or rationally tenable. In the aphorism quoted above, Nietzsche suggests that, for most people, "This deed is still more remote to them than the remotest stars – *and yet they have*

⁷ Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 27.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁹ Zupančič, 35.

*done it themselves!”*¹⁰ As I will discuss further below, this “remoteness” suggests that the crisis of values Nietzsche observes, though he takes its contemporary effects to be ubiquitous, has yet to be widely recognized as a problem. Traditional values, secularized and religious alike, have malfunctioned such that the benefit of their stability no longer outweighs the cost of their hegemony. Rather than guaranteeing a sense of meaning and purpose, the traditional values of the West have come to guarantee a kind of neurosis. Nietzsche and Lacan agree that the mechanism by which God has survived his own death in this sense is more subtle than simple cultural inheritance; they take the idea of God to be encoded into the very interstices of speech and language such that He is tacitly assumed, preserved, and recreated in the most everyday operations of language as the force that binds subjectivity to torturous demands. In Lacan’s terms, “as long as things are said, the God hypothesis will persist,”¹¹ while Nietzsche says, “I am afraid we are not rid of God because we still have faith in grammar.”¹² To see how these two thinkers converge in their responses to the problem of God one must first understand how each of them takes the preservation of an undead God in language to be possible.

1.2 The desires and demands of the Other in the Lacanian subject

One of the best in-roads to Lacan’s views as a whole, and central to his understanding of God’s persistence in language, is his theory of the individual’s relationship with the unconscious as “Other,” often described in psychoanalytic literature as the “big Other”

¹⁰ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 120.

¹¹ Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XX: Encore*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992), 45.

¹² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 483.

for two reasons. First, the “big” or capitalized O distinguishes the Other from the lowercase “other,” the latter most often denoting another person in the ordinary sense. Second, and more importantly, “the Other” describes a complex of psychical forces at work in language that is similar in power and function to Freud’s superego; it is the internalized locus of all moral authority, prohibitions, and demands concerning identity and desire. The prominent translator and Lacanian analyst Bruce Fink suggests that “the Other is that foreign language we must learn to speak which is euphemistically referred to as our ‘native tongue,’ but which would be much better termed our ‘mOther tongue’: it is the discourse and desires of others around us insofar as the former are internalized.”¹³ Another way of phrasing the above is that Lacan’s theory of the Other is an interpretation of language as inherently symptomatic; the language(s) one speaks are encoded with values and ideals that bear on one’s relationships, goals, and sense of identity such that one is full, or typically *overfull*, with unconscious suggestions, rules, or demands concerning desire, action, and self-development.

It bears remarking here that the unconscious overflow of these demands is the broadest definition of the Lacanian symptom and, furthermore, that such neurosis is taken by Lacan to be the de facto psychology of linguistic human beings. Lacan writes, “‘The unconscious is not the fact that being thinks’ – though that is implied by what is said thereof in traditional science – ‘the unconscious is the fact that being, by speaking, enjoys, and,’ I will add, ‘wants to know nothing more about it.’ I will add that that means ‘know nothing about it at all.’”¹⁴ In this context, “being” should be taken to mean the

¹³ Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 11.

¹⁴ Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 104-105.

structural substrate of the possibilities of the human situation, the psychological structures of the world of language and meaning. Accordingly, Lacan's belief is that it is not the *subject* or the *ego* that is really at the helm of the ship of language, but rather those very structures which make egoic subjectivity possible. The thinking "I" is an *effect* of language, not its master. Most importantly though, when these structures give rise to speech acts they *enjoy* it, and the egoic subject would quite prefer not to know anything concerning the details of these processes.

This notion of "enjoyment," or *jouissance*, is crucial to the Lacanian understanding of how internalized regulations and demands concerning desire and identity formation can lead to the development of psychoanalytic symptoms in the individual. I will preface my discussion of *jouissance*, however, with a preliminary articulation of Lacan's three registers of the 'Symbolic,' the 'Real,' and the 'Imaginary,' as well as the general Lacanian theory of desire to which *jouissance* belongs. For now, though the meaning of these terms will develop as I attend to Lacan's thinking more closely in my next chapter, I will identify the Symbolic as the unconscious seat of language where inherited associations of meaning, prohibitions, and regulations of desire are encoded; the Imaginary as the everyday warp and weft of one's conscious, egoic experiences; and the Real as the limit or interstices of what is recorded in either of the former, that which enters consciousness only as a traumatic or enigmatic irruption.¹⁵ In elaborating the role of the Symbolic, another of Fink's formulations is quite helpful: "Symbolic relations are those with the Other as language, knowledge, law, career,

¹⁵ When these terms are capitalized I mean them in the specifically Lacanian sense outlined here. This is to avoid any ambiguity between the ordinary and Lacanian senses of the terms, especially in the case of the Lacanian Real versus the real of common reality. The latter sense of reality belongs much more accurately to the Imaginary.

academia, authority, morality, ideals, and so on, and with the objects designated (or, more strongly stated, demanded) by the Other: grades, diplomas, success, marriage, children – all the things usually associated with anxiety in neurosis.”¹⁶ The Symbolic, understood in this way, is not only the seat of language, but the locus of *demands* that one enjoy or desire in particular ways, that one sustain oneself with fantasies about particular ideal realizations of *jouissance*.

Lacan traces the origin of such unconscious demands back to the inauguration of language and desire in infancy, where the infant’s relation to the Symbolic “mother” and “father” first establishes the Symbolic register as the seat of the Other. In the earliest stages of life, most famously theorized by Lacan in his early essay on the “mirror stage,” the infant feels itself to be symbiotically unified with a primary caregiver, who thereby occupies (or, more accurately, will come to occupy) the position of the Symbolic mother. The infant feels all of its desires to be satisfied by this mother, while imagining incorrectly that all of the mother’s desires are likewise satisfied by this relationship. Moreover, because the infant does not perceive anything as lacking either in itself or in its mother, it experiences this situation with a prevailing sense of being, fullness, and stability. Eventually, this imagined situation of unity, satiety, and being is broken by the realization that there is someone else in the world capable of diverting the attention of the mother away by offering her some satisfaction that the infant cannot. This third person to enter the scene occupies the position of the Symbolic father and initiates the infant’s entry into the world of language by introducing the first signifier into the symbolic order: the “Name-of-the-Father” (NF).

¹⁶ Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 87.

Lacan describes the NF as “the signifier which, in the Other, qua locus of the signifier, is the signifier of the Other qua locus of the Law.”¹⁷ This can be understood in several ways. First, before this moment the infant did not require language to secure either its material wellbeing or the desire of the mother (or so it thought). When the father then steals the mother’s attention away and reveals that he possesses some desirable quality that the infant lacks, the mutual satisfaction between infant and mother is suddenly transformed from something taken for granted into something that must be solicited and won. The “law” that is instantiated by the father’s disruption of this feeling of unity is a prohibition (against unmediated satisfaction) that inaugurates linguistic subjectivity as an obligatory game of Symbolic exchange, played to solicit attention, recognition, and love. In this way the NF, the “*Nom-du-Père*,” is simultaneously the No-of-the-Father, the “*Non-du-Père*.” This subjection to the law of the Symbolic and the wound it creates when it shatters the infant’s sense of being is the Lacanian sense of castration. Crucially, instead of pure and unmediated satisfaction this new subjectivity of language promises *jouissance*.

Jouissance should generally be understood as similar to the English term “enjoyment,” but with the inclusion of the sexual connotations that the English phrase has gradually lost.¹⁸ As Lacan’s thought progresses, the concept of *jouissance* moves beyond an exclusively sexual meaning and takes on an increasingly dangerous, painful, and threatening character associated with an increase in psychic tension,¹⁹ distinguishing it

¹⁷ Jacques Lacan, “On a Question Prior to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis” in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 485. (“Question”)

¹⁸ Translator Alan Sheridan’s commentary at the end of Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 281.

¹⁹ Dylan Evans, “From Kantian Ethics to Mystical Experience: An Exploration of *Jouissance*,” in *Key Concepts of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (New York: Other Press, 1998), 6-8.

even further from the calming effect of mere pleasure denoted by the term *plaisir*. In Freud's terms, the pleasure principle is the basic psychic drive to achieve a state of minimal tension and excitation; *jouissance*, as an enjoyment beyond mere pleasure that comes at the cost of pain,²⁰ lies decidedly *beyond* the pleasure principle in association with death.

The kind of *jouissance* promised by the Symbolic order, then, is of a specifically dampened and muted type, what is known in Lacanian parlance as “phallic” *jouissance*. The “phallus” is an assumption by the infant, the unidentifiable Symbolic “x” the father seems to have used to capture the mother's attention and desire. This imagined “x” then becomes the infant's idealized object of desire. As the analyst Dylan Evans notes, “the memory of the first impression of the mother's complete *jouissance* will persist in the illusion of a superabundant *jouissance* accessible only to the Other.”²¹ Essentially this means that the infant's experience of the inauguration of language sets up a lasting and fundamental fantasy that perfect satisfaction is still possible in the world, and is indeed enjoyed somewhere, somehow, by someone, but that this satisfaction must be pursued according to the rules of Symbolic law. The phallus, then, is the ever-elusive Symbolic attribute that each person pursues in their lifetime of Symbolic exchanges with others, believing unconsciously that attaining it would finally restore them to the ideal state of completion, satisfaction, and being from which they imagine they were torn. This pursuit, in a word, is the Lacanian sense of neurotic desire. While the individual still experiences mere pleasures (taste, touch, warmth, comfort, etc.), the engine of their desire is fueled by the pursuit of an additional layer of Symbolically mediated *jouissance* that

²⁰ Ibid., 6.

²¹ Ibid., 9.

structures their world and gives life the character of an infinite approach to an elusive promise of being and identity. Furthermore, as I will explore in detail in my next chapter, the internal contradictions in the Other regarding the meanings, values, senses of identity, and enjoyments it demands and prohibits, along with the individual's inability to adequately satisfy these demands, set up subjectivity and desire as inherently symptomatic.

While this account of the individual's relationship to the Other shows how linguistic subjectivity internalizes and perpetuates certain demands regarding meaning, value, and identity, it is also in this very relationship of *jouissance* to the Other that the God hypothesis manifests itself. For Lacan, the problem is precisely the illusion, described above, of "a superabundant *jouissance* accessible only to the Other" that sustains one's faith in the efficacy of the Symbolic order. To understand this properly one must recall that the infant experiences its union with its mother as fullness, completion, and the unmediated enjoyment of being. Though Symbolic law shatters this imagined being and installs a sense of lack in the individual, a residual illusion is unavoidably erected as an axiom of desire: somewhere, being still exists and enjoys itself perfectly, without mediation. As the psychoanalyst Roberto Harari phrases it,

[L]anguage makes speech possible and thus always provokes a certain excavation or extraction of *jouissance*, which pushes us into conceiving of the latter as something absolute, from which we have been unfairly and temporarily separated. We do not accept this, believing—this is also due to language—that somewhere that extraction has not

taken place, that there must be a totality and an Other, full, absolute jouissance to which we can ultimately have access.²²

To summarize, Lacan's view is that the Symbolic order of language is an unconscious network of valuations, meanings, and prohibitions which structure the direction and the limits of each individual's desire as an attempt to recover of a lost sense of being.

Undergirding this structure of desire is the fundamental unconscious belief that somewhere in the depths of this order of reality there is a justifying exception: a perfect being that enjoys absolutely. For Nietzsche, the lure of such illusions of being is the symptom that has overwhelmed the history of Western thought.

1.2 Nietzsche's critique of truth and the symptom of metaphysics

The broader picture of Nietzsche's thought is perhaps most readily understood when one views it through the lens of his critique of language, which interprets external reality as a kind of artistic construction. Moreover, this aspect of Nietzsche's thought offers an ideal foundation for integrating his thought with Lacan's. Just as Lacan believes that language engenders a pathological desire for unattainable senses of being, Nietzsche suggests that the inner logic of Western thought has historically trended towards an untenable insistence upon permanence as the hallmark of truth and value. As I will show, Nietzsche's general position is that the idealization permanence and identity and the disparaging of the ephemeral are unconsciously coded into language itself, such that language disguises both its own character and the character of consciousness, thereby perpetuating fatal misunderstandings which threaten the possibility of creativity and

²² Roberto Harari, *How James Joyce Made his Name: A Reading of the Final Lacan*, trans. Luke Thurston (New York: Other Press, 2002), 91.

freedom. Fundamentally, he takes this hidden ideology of language to operate according to a religious logic: we collectively project an otherworldly domain of orderliness and truth beyond the chaos of reality,²³ and in doing so tacitly preserve the function of God as the ground of this order even when we consciously abandon religiosity.

While Nietzsche's thought is commonly broken into three distinct periods (an early "metaphysical" period ranging from his time as a student through to the completion of his *Untimely Meditations* eight years later, a "positivistic" period encompassing his writing of the volumes of *Human, All Too Human* and *Daybreak*, and a "tragic" period of immense productivity in the final seven years of his creative life), if one follows the thread of his critique of language it is possible to recognize that he is centrally and continuously concerned with the ways that linguistic subjectivity traps itself in certain pathological errors. One of his very early unpublished essays, "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense" (*TL*), offers an initial articulation of these ideas that Nietzsche then unfolds and elaborates over the course of his subsequent writings. The significance of this trajectory, as I will show, is that the problems Nietzsche identifies through his analysis of language lead him to, and become the basis of, his imbricated theories of pathology, creativity, and the question of freedom – the nexus of Nietzsche's ideas that most fruitfully complements Lacan's.

In *TL* Nietzsche focuses his critique on two related problems: first, the prevailing biases of language towards identity and being, and second, the commonplace faith in language as an adequate vehicle for the comprehension and articulation of objective truth. These issues pertain to the problem of the death of God because Nietzsche characterizes

²³ For example, the popular conception of mathematics as the inherent and independent "code" or "operating system" of the universe, rather than a conceptual construction of human beings.

belief in the independent order and consistency of reality as a psychological defense against the problematically creative character of existence: “only because man forgets himself as a subject, and indeed as *an artistically creative* subject, does he live with some degree of peace, security, and consistency; if he could escape for just a moment from the prison walls of this faith, it would mean the end of his ‘consciousness of self’.”²⁴ Here Nietzsche points out that accepting linguistic subjectivity to be a kind of grand aesthetic artifice threatens not only the stability of meaning, but also the very stability of any ordinary sense of self. On this point he is in agreement with Lacan, in the sense that anything that might break the spell of the Symbolic order’s hold on the subject (any disruption of the order of meaning and identification that mediates *jouissance*) would also threaten to unravel the senses of being and identity that the Symbolic establishes as the central desires of lived experience.²⁵ As such, Nietzsche takes the entrenchment of the ordinary understanding of language to be supported by the shelter it provides from the problematic question of creativity.

Turning towards this problematic of creativity, Nietzsche offers a way into his perspective through an analysis of the provenance of phenomenal experience. He suggests that conscious experience can be understood as the product of layered acts of translation that ultimately separate human reality from any objective or independent reality that might be conceived beyond it:

[C]orrect perception – which would mean the full and adequate expression of an object in the subject – is something contradictory and impossible; for between two absolutely

²⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense,” in *Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. Raymond Guess and Ronald Speirs, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 148. (TL)

²⁵ One of the most central threads of my thesis consists in the articulation of this destabilization of identity as the window of opportunity that Lacan and Nietzsche seek to do positive work within.

different spheres, such as subject and object are, there is no causality, no correctness, no expression, but at most an *aesthetic* way of relating, by which I mean an allusive transference, a stammering translation into a quite different language.²⁶

He believes, then, that the insurmountable distance and unknowability of any kind of noumenal reality necessitates that the external objects of perception are subjectively constructed phenomena. For Nietzsche, we do not receive impressions of external objects as they are in and of themselves, but instead relate to the external world in a thoroughly aesthetic way, through an artifice of creative translation that interprets and constructs the very objects of our perception.

This process of aesthetic translation and interpretation is, for Nietzsche, metaphorical. He takes up the example of the biological model of perception in order to catch this process of aesthetic or metaphorical translation in the act:

The ‘thing-in-itself’ (which would be, precisely, pure truth, truth without consequences) is impossible even for the creator of language to grasp, and indeed this is not at all desirable. He designates only the relations of things to human beings, and in order to express them he avails himself of the boldest metaphors. The stimulation of a nerve is first translated into an image: first metaphor! The image is then imitated by a sound: second metaphor! And each time there is a complete leap from one sphere into the heart of another, new sphere.²⁷

This suggests that the purported objectivity of phenomenal experience should not be taken for granted. Sight begins with the stimulation of rods and cones in the eye, which is then translated into the experience of an image. This is to say that Nietzsche takes the

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 144.

external objects of sight not to be transmitted to experience objectively, but rather passed through an interpretive process of translation that stands at a significant step of removal from external reality. Moreover, he takes the perceptions that provide us with the basis for such biological models of perception to be *interpretive translations themselves*, already transfigured into a uniquely human form of experience. In the words of one of Nietzsche's chief influences, the German philosopher Friedrich Lange, "Our visible (bodily) organs are, like all other parts of the world of appearance, only pictures of an unknown object."²⁸

While all of this is significant, the *second* act of translation described above, that in which the "image is then imitated by a sound," is the aspect of Nietzsche's account that ties the problem of perception to much deeper problems of language. The real force of Nietzsche's argument is that any experience of an external object, itself produced by a "bold leap" from body to mind, is then traded for a signifier when the experience is substituted by its translation into language. The conceptual experience of the human being is thus (at least, on this account) two steps of removal from any supposed "thing in itself": first, the translation of an external world into sensory experience, and second, the translation of that sensory experience into bits of language that boldly metaphorize even this *experience* itself, the latter already a creative interpretation of something far more elusive.

Nietzsche therefore problematizes the idea that conceptual experience corresponds to the "truth" of things in any straightforwardly objective sense. Language is, at best, metaphorical translation; it trades only in metaphors for thoroughly

²⁸ Quoted from Julian Young, *Friedrich Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 90.

anthropomorphic experience, rather than objectively apprehended external objects. One of Nietzsche's most well-known passages asserts that this problem undermines the traditional notion of truth itself:

What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms, in short a sum of human relations which have been subjected to poetic and rhetorical intensification, translation, and decoration, and which, after they have been in use for a long time, strike people as firmly established, canonical, and binding; truths are illusions of which we have forgotten they are illusions... thus [people] lie unconsciously... and precisely *because of this unconsciousness*, precisely because of this forgetting, they arrive at the feeling of truth.²⁹

Nietzsche holds that the traditional idea of "truth," taken in the sense that true statements achieve an adequate expression of or correspondence to an independently consistent and objective reality, is a lie that conceals the creative artifice of experience. Whenever Nietzsche critiques or disparages "metaphysics" it is precisely this dissimulation that he has in mind, as this error is integral to all metaphysical belief in the inherent order and self-identity of conceptual truth.

In opposition to the view of truth as an independent order of permanence and identity, Nietzsche develops his thought around an understanding of truth that embraces the inherent impermanence and transience of reality: "[The senses] do not lie at all. What we *make* of their testimony, that alone introduces lies; for example, the lie of unity, the lie of thinghood, of substance, of permanence... Insofar as the senses show becoming, passing away, and change, they do not lie. But... being is an empty fiction. The

²⁹ Nietzsche, *TL*, 146.

‘apparent’ world is the only one: the ‘true’ world is merely added by a lie.”³⁰ Nietzsche’s perennial position, then, is that the artifice of our metaphorical and interpretive construction of identity and being has disguised itself over time in the pursuit of a comforting illusion of external order. What humanity has therefore hidden from itself is its inherent creativity, the active role of linguistic subjectivity in the forging of all senses of being and permanence.

For Nietzsche, this repression of creative responsibility amounts to an unconscious preservation of the conceptual function of God. God, as the guarantor of the eternal order of truth and meaning, haunts the structure of language insofar as the senses of identity and being at play in conceptual experience are thought to belong to an external order of reality. Since we deny both the artistic construction of our world of concepts and the dependence of all identity and permanence upon this linguistic artifice, we unwittingly preserve a religious logic of permanence and truth at the heart of reality. Nietzsche’s account of God’s haunting of language is therefore somewhat different from Lacan’s, but points towards the same conclusion: the language we inherit comes bootstrapped with the logic that its signifiers efficaciously embody and correspond to an order of objectivity, self-identity, and being, and this logic leads some of our interpretations to be mistaken for unassailable truths. In Lacan’s words, “to say the truth about truth is to say that it is a lie.”³¹

This problem of language, as I have suggested, eventually leads Nietzsche to conclude that the lies humanity tells itself, though they do in many ways provide life with

³⁰ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 481.

³¹ Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XXIII: The Sinthome*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company), 132.

a livable veneer of simplicity, have grown over time into a set of convictions that render life *unlivable* and become canonical and binding. In this sense, Nietzsche's critique targets the same structure of language identified by Lacan's critique of phallic *jouissance*: linguistic subjectivity pursues and enjoys fantasies of being and identity that the very structure of language, the Symbolic law, demands. Moreover, while these fantasies do serve to organize and mediate existence, the *fixity* of their perceived objectivity engenders tremendous suffering precisely because it arrests creativity.

As a specific example, the Western sense of self as an enduring, self-identical "I" endowed with an efficacious free will is a highly significant case, not only because it exemplifies the duplicitous preservation of religious metaphysics (the self-identity and free will of the soul), but also because this interpretation of the self significantly conditions the ethical regulation of desire. Commenting on the error of this idea, Nietzsche argues, "Our usual imprecise mode of observation takes a group of phenomena as one and calls it a fact... it *isolates* every fact... belief in freedom of will... presupposes that *every individual action is isolate and indivisible*; it is an *atomism* in the domain of willing and knowing."³² This helps to demonstrate the sense in which projections of identity come to constrain human existence. In truth, objects and events bleed into one another; any human action is conditioned by a vast history that leads up to it, each human organism is a dynamic event that constantly exchanges matter and energy with its environment, and so on. In place of such a complicated view of things, we tend to treat people as if their actions were somehow causally separate from such capricious conditions as biology or history.

³² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 306.

The real problem with this is not that humanity remains wedded to distortions or misunderstandings of itself, but that the fixity of these distortions tends to doom people to limited and symptomatic horizons. In Nietzsche's words, "Today we no longer have any pity for the concept of 'free will': we know only too well what it really is—the foulest of all theologian's artifices, aimed at making mankind 'responsible' in their sense... Wherever responsibilities are sought, it is usually the instinct of wanting to be judge and punish which is at work."³³ The issue, then, is that the identity and free will attributed to the self leads directly into the trap of neurotic guilt and shame. One imagines oneself to be free to enact the virtues demanded by the Other but remains continuously confronted with the failure to live up to this ideal self-image, and even accepts punishment for this failure as justified. Nietzsche, like Lacan, recognizes that God's haunting of language produces a fundamental neurosis in linguistic subjectivity, and believes that these problems must be overcome together: "That nobody is held responsible any longer, that the mode of being may not be traced back to a *causa prima*... that alone is the great liberation; with this alone is the innocence of becoming restored. The concept of 'God' was until now the greatest objection to existence. We deny God, we deny the responsibility in god: only thereby do we redeem the world."³⁴ The disguised religious logic of language, on Nietzsche's view, binds subjectivity to a fixed and symptomatic horizon of identity and value.

In summary, then, Nietzsche and Lacan both believe that the task of overcoming God must be realized through a certain overcoming of linguistic subjectivity itself, at least so long as language continues to reproduce the metaphysical logic of religion. In

³³ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 499.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 501.

this shared diagnostic framework, we see that Nietzsche and Lacan each theorize how an individual might be able to overcome the senses of identity and meaning demanded by the Other and cultivate a creative agency in the spheres of meaning, identity, and desire. At its core, the possibility of such creativity depends upon the efficacy of sublimation.

1.3 Nihilism as a crisis of sublimation³⁵

The problem of nihilism as a mortal threat to creativity is illuminated by the integration of Nietzsche's and Lacan's theories. Nietzsche's most noteworthy translator and commentator in Anglo-American philosophy, Walter Kaufmann, suggests that theorizing the escape from nihilism is Nietzsche's "greatest and most persistent problem,"³⁶ and that this fundamental problem is one of values.³⁷ Lacan, on the other hand, does not take up the mantle of the problem of nihilism in Nietzsche's sense, but rather remains focused on exploring the individual's symptomatic relationship to language and the Other. These two approaches converge, however, as soon as one rephrases the problem: how can one understand the capacity of the individual to *create* values that are not sanctioned by Symbolic law? Moreover, what might prohibit or foreclose the possibility of such creativity? In other words, how can an individual *desire creatively* in a way that is well and truly their own rather than having their desire dictated by the language of the Other? Such creativity in the realm of desire is the Lacanian sense of sublimation and precisely what Nietzsche takes to be threatened by nihilism.

³⁵ This phrase is borrowed from Zupančič, where it appears across the titles of two subsequent sections: "Nihilism..." and "...as a 'Crisis of Sublimation'?" Zupančič, 1.

³⁶ Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 102.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 121.

Zupančič argues that “with the ‘death of God,’ we get a Symbolic deprived of its inherent power, a Symbolic that does not manage to create or produce anything with its rituals,” such that one can understand the problem of values as “the absence of a power or mechanism for creating values.”³⁸ This means that the Lacanian sense of sublimation, to which I attend in more detail below, is the creative affirmation or actualization of a desire beyond those deemed valuable or possible by the Other. The stakes of such creative sublimation, meanwhile, are intensified by Nietzsche’s argument that this creative capacity might come to be irrevocably lost.

Nietzsche describes the threat to sublimation looming on the horizon of history in terms of a kind of collapse of desire: “Alas, the time is coming when man will no longer shoot the arrow of his longing beyond man, and the string of his bow will have forgotten how to whir!”³⁹ This warning suggests that the creative powers of humanity are on the verge of atrophying irreversibly from disuse. To phrase things in terms of the problem of language, Nietzsche believes that humanity may one day prove to have inescapably walled itself into a corner by committing to a final interpretation of reality that totally prohibits the creation of anything beyond it.

The image of the bowstring in the passage just quoted has rich connections to the notion of the psychic tension of *jouissance* as the painful but necessary vehicle of creativity. Nietzsche often describes such tension as chaos: “I say unto you: one must still have chaos in oneself to give birth to a dancing star. I say unto you: you still have chaos in yourselves.”⁴⁰ This image evokes the notion of humanity learning to illuminate

³⁸ Ibid., 73.

³⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufman, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 129.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

reality anew, thus relieving God and the Good of such duties. The passage continues, however, with a description of the impending loss of all such creative tension: “Alas, the time is coming when man will no longer give birth to a star. Alas, the time of the most despicable man is coming, he that is no longer able to despise himself. Behold, I show you the *last man*. ‘What is love? What is creation? What is longing? What is a star?’ thus asks the last man, and he blinks... ‘We have invented happiness,’ say the last men, and they blink.”⁴¹ Here, the stakes of nihilism are articulated as the potential collapse of even the ability to imagine any senses of value, meaning, or purpose that might be better, more potent, or more beautiful than those that currently prevail. Furthermore, the finality of the mantra of this collapse of creativity, “We have invented happiness,” points back to Lacan’s suggestion that the demands of the Other are given weight by the subject’s presumption of a totalizing consistency at the heart of Symbolic law.

The potential collapse of the capacity to create new values expressed by the idea of the last man, translated into psychoanalytic terms, corresponds to the threat of a reality principle winning out against all others and becoming irreversibly entrenched. Zupančič defines the reality principle as that which “‘self-evidently’ functions as the limit of the possible.”⁴² If the Symbolic order is the locus of meaning and value in language, then the reality principle is that aspect of the Symbolic that permits or prohibits the recognition or possibility of potential organizations of value and desire. Zupančič suggests that “the reality principle is not simply some kind of natural way associated with how things are... The reality principle itself is ideologically mediated; one could even claim that it constitutes the highest form of ideology, the ideology that presents itself as empirical fact

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Zupančič, 81.

or (biological, economic...) necessity (and that we tend to perceive as nonideological).”⁴³ This sense of the reality principle is precisely the entrenchment of interpretation-become-fact that Nietzsche attempts to illuminate: the hegemony of an interpretation of reality that refuses to admit either its own status as interpretation or the validity (that is, possibility) of interpretations or valuations that challenge its totality.

The problem with the contemporary reality principle, from this perspective, is not only that it denies the possibility of new values, interpretations, or desires, but also that even neurotic desire begins to deflate and malfunction when the Other demands that one enjoy the last man’s “invented happiness” as perfected, ubiquitous, and final. Zupančič articulates this problem well, writing,

It seems as if we were dealing with some perverse delight concerning the fact that we have finally reached the point where nothing (other) is possible, and can thus peacefully enjoy our lives... let us give up on our [own] desire, and we will no longer be prey to all the difficult (and ‘ideological’) choices with which our desire confronts us—Wrong! The result is, instead, that we no longer have a moment’s peace... since there is nothing beyond the reality (principle), we have to enjoy each and every moment of it. And there is no need to point out that this imperative of enjoyment is the surest way to make any enjoyment impossible.⁴⁴

The implication of this reading is that even the economy of phallic *jouissance* is only enjoyable when it is open to creative exceptions, when the possibility of creativity and novelty in the domain of value and desire remains open. Rather than offering a utopia of

⁴³ Ibid., 77.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 81-82.

enjoyment, an overly tyrannical reality principle short-circuits desire and hollows out the character of human life by undermining even the very enjoyment it demands.

Lacan theorizes sublimation as an ethical path of action that leads beyond such a hegemonic stasis of desire and value. In its unique Lacanian sense, sublimation is the process by which values that are prohibited or unrecognized by the reality principle are insisted upon and elevated by individuals in a refusal to yield to prohibitive norms. Insofar as this process is taken as the primary mechanism of creating new values, sublimation has a necessarily ethical dimension. Zupančič describes Lacanian sublimation as “the creation of a certain space, scene, or ‘stage’ that enables us to value something that is situated beyond the reality principle, as well as beyond the principle of the common good,” adding, “It is at this point that sublimation is related to ethics.”⁴⁵ To grasp this properly one must understand the difference between Lacanian sublimation and the sense of sublimation as it is ordinarily conceived.

The commonplace understanding of sublimation usually denotes the channeling of sexual or destructive drives into activities that benefit the common good, thereby harmonizing the individual with the order of the reality principle. Joan Copjec describes this as “the vulgar misinterpretation of sublimation.”⁴⁶ Instead, she suggests, sublimation in its Lacanian sense ought to be conceived as a process by which a drive achieves a kind of construction of its object: “There could not be a better description of drive/sublimation [than this]: *it so wills what occurs that the object it finds is indistinguishable from the one it chooses*. Construction and discovery, thinking and being, as well as drive and object

⁴⁵ Ibid., 78.

⁴⁶ Joan Copjec, *Imagine There's No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), 57.

are soldered together.”⁴⁷ This notion of sublimation is informed by Lacan’s critique of traditional ontology, which he often attempts to communicate by challenging the central senses of being and identity that populate the domain of sexuality. Woman does not exist,⁴⁸ and there is no sexual relationship,⁴⁹ Lacan says. Copjec argues that what is truly striking about such claims is their “reliance on a definition of being as plural and partial, as small objects of the drive... The ethics of psychoanalysis follows from its fundamental critique of ontology... This ethics concerns the subject’s relation to these small pieces of being, not primarily its relation to other people or to the Other.”⁵⁰ Taken in this way, sublimation is not a challenge addressed to the Other. Instead, it primarily involves the insistence of a certain creativity in the drive’s relation to its object; sublimation therefore describes the way that desire mobilizes the artifice of truth to the effect of simultaneously discovering and constructing its object. By doing so, sublimation separates thought “from the supposed subject of knowledge, that is, from the Other. For, the satisfaction of the drive by sublimation testifies to the autonomy of the subject, her independence from the Other.”⁵¹ As such, this creative discovery of the object of desire instantiates a localized and partial sense of being that disrupts the totalizing character of the Other’s knowledge.

In his seventh seminar on ethics, Lacan takes up a discussion of Kant that serves to illustrate this idea of sublimation more concretely. He discusses a thought experiment of Kant’s, in which a hypothetical man has been given the choice to sleep with the

⁴⁷ Ibid., 38.

⁴⁸ Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 7.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 9.

⁵⁰ Copjec, 8.

⁵¹ Ibid., 44.

woman of his dreams at the penalty of execution.⁵² In her commentary on this example, Zupančič suggests that if the man “opts for death, the reason for this is not necessarily his inability to renounce pleasure: in the given circumstances, the choice of pleasure... is the only way for him to show that he is able to act contrary to... the reality principle... If this man were to act as Kant suggests... he would embrace the pleasure principle as the ultimate principle of his action.”⁵³ In this sense, the dangerous act of identifying with a desire that moves beyond the safety of Symbolic law can be counted as ethical insofar as it insists upon the dignity and reality of a deeply personal truth of desire.

The conception of sublimation as a kind of creative artifice, then, draws Nietzsche’s and Lacan’s thought together around a shared reconceptualization of truth and ontology that aims to protect and foster creativity as such. Lacanian sublimation is, in Zupančič’s words, “not only a creation of some new good, but also (and principally) the creation and maintenance of a certain space for objects that have no place in the given, extant reality, objects that are considered ‘impossible.’”⁵⁴ Nietzsche’s thought appreciates and enacts the understanding of linguistic subjectivity at play in this pursuit of truths beyond the rule of the Other. As Zupančič suggests, “Nietzsche’s bet on appearance is not a bet on appearance *against* truth,” but rather “a bet on truth as inherent to appearance,”⁵⁵ in the sense that “the Real is inherent to truth as its inner limit, as what redoubles truth into knowledge.”⁵⁶ As the rest of my thesis will demonstrate, Lacan’s

⁵² Kant’s point is that this man would obviously choose his own life over mere pleasure, while in a different situation the same man would at least consider choosing death if his only options were to die or to break with the moral law (in the example, by agreeing to commit perjury against an innocent man in exchange for freedom).

⁵³ Zupančič, 76.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 77-78.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 142.

theory of the *sinthome* and Nietzsche's tragic theory of self-overcoming stand as complementary and interrelated attempts to open, unfold, and transmit the possibility of such creative manipulations of the Real in order to liberate the subject's relationship to truth and desire.

1.4 The *sinthome* and self-overcoming as responses to the death of God

Lacan's idea of the *sinthome* represents the final development of his theory of sublimation, and therefore his final creative response to the problem of God in language in the sense outlined above. Nietzsche, too, develops his tragic philosophy of self-overcoming as an attempt to creatively overcome this same problem. While the extant texts on the Nietzsche-Lacan connection mentioned at the outset of this chapter go quite far in developing a dialogue between the two, not one of them does any serious work with Lacan's idea of the *sinthome*, the central and transformative concept of his final seminars. As the rest of my thesis will show, Lacan's reconceptualization of sublimation through the idea of the *sinthome* provides a remarkable and untapped framework for exploring the connections between Nietzsche and Lacan that stands to clarify and amplify the trajectories of their thought.

To this end, my next chapter is a careful explication of the theory of the *sinthome* as it appears in Lacan's *Seminar XXIII: The Sinthome*. Essentially, the revolutionary idea of the *sinthome* is that psychoanalytic discourse must aim to overturn the symptomatic experience of the language of the Other by bringing the analysand to identify with their symptom in a very novel sense. By so doing, the analysand is able to move beyond the neurotic pursuit of the senses of meaning, identity, and being that Symbolic exchange

ordinarily offers in favour of establishing a totally unique and singular organization of desire. This psychological shift primarily consists in the subject coming to hold open the space of the Real of language, such that the ossified network of meaning encoded into the Other and its reality principle gives way to the possibility of a poetic freedom of desire. All of this amounts to a model of how an individual is able to rewrite their relationship to God and language to the effect of becoming responsible for the foundational aspects of *jouissance* that are related to the Name-of-the-Father in a creative and liberating way.

The third chapter of my thesis then applies the specific insights of the *sinthome* to the philosophy of Nietzsche's tragic period. I approach this by exploring the possibility of a sinthomatic reading of Nietzsche's thought at three levels. First, I examine the theoretical aspect of Nietzsche's late writings in order to establish the compatibility between his mature understanding of language, truth, and consciousness with the key tenets of Lacan's theory of the *sinthome*. Second, I explore Nietzsche's relationship to the Greek god Dionysus and argue that the figure of this god can be taken, in effect, as a site of Nietzsche's personal act of sinthomatic identification and writing. Finally, I explore Nietzsche's teachings of self-overcoming as they appear in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, where he strives to impart his tragic wisdom of creativity to others in a thoroughly sinthomatic way.

Chapter Two: Desire, Creativity, and Truth in Lacan's *Sinthome*

2.1 Introduction

Lacan's theory of the *sinthome*, articulated most fully towards the end of his life in *Seminar XXIII: The Sinthome* of 1975-76, stands as the last great turning point in his thought. Generally, Lacanian psychoanalysis is an attempt to understand the relationship between desire and the unconscious in individual subjects in the sense articulated in my previous chapter. Accordingly, the central clinical problem of psychoanalysis is the "symptom," some object of desire that is known by the unconscious but manifests in conscious experience as a strange problem, a disturbing pattern of behaviour or thought that persists, repeats, and produces unease or suffering through its discord with egoic experience at the level of the Imaginary. The *sinthome* is a watershed idea in Lacanian thought because it reconceptualizes the symptom as a possible kernel of utterly unique, singular, and personal desire, as opposed to conceiving of the symptom as an unrealized demand inherited from the Other. If the symptom is merely an unconscious yearning for some Symbolic satisfaction demanded by the Other then it is something to be decoded, unraveled, and ultimately escaped or overcome. If, on the other hand, the symptom troubles the subject precisely because it is the seed of a desire for something the reality principle deems impossible then it is something to be uncovered, realized, and *identified with* as an engine of creativity and liberation. The heresy of liberating one's desire by identifying with such a symptom is the transfiguration of the symptom through the writing of the *sinthome*.

Lacan's shift from his earlier theories of the symptom to the discussion of the *sinthome* in his later years embodies the spirit of experimentalism that pervades the

whole of his thought. This same experimentalism also characterizes Nietzsche's thought and, in both cases, demands that the reader strive to keep a holistic view in mind when attending to any particularly novel text or concept.⁵⁷ Walter Kaufmann emphasizes the importance of this experimentalism,⁵⁸ and his characterization of this style as "problem" or "dialectical" thought applies equally to Nietzsche and Lacan: "Nietzsche is... not a system-thinker but a problem thinker... The starting point of such a "dialectical" inquiry is not a set of premises but a problem situation... premises are involved, and some of these are made explicit in the course of the inquiry. The result is less a solution of the initial problem than a realization of its limitations: typically, the problem is not solved but 'outgrown.'"⁵⁹

The broader challenge, then, is that neither Lacan nor Nietzsche should be understood as ever having arrived at the position of a finished system. In Lacan's case, he is always working through problems in such a way that his newer thought problematizes and rearranges what comes before it. Bruce Fink suggests that "we should admire... not the final *product* but the flow or process of Lacan's writing: its twists and turns, recursive style, and movement... a teaching worthy of the name must not end with the creation of a perfect, complete system... a genuine teaching continues to evolve, to call itself into question, to forge new concepts."⁶⁰ Indeed, as Fink notes, this was also how Lacan approached Freud's works.⁶¹ Lacan writes of Freud, "let us not stop at the labels on the drawers, although many people confuse them with the fruits of science. Let

⁵⁷ David Rathbone, "Kaufmann's Nietzsche," in *Interpreting Nietzsche: Reception and Influence*, ed. Ashley Woodward (New York: Continuum, 2011), 60.

⁵⁸ Kaufmann, 85.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁶⁰ Bruce Fink, *Lacan to the Letter: Reading Écrits Closely* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 66.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 67.

us read the texts; let us follow Freud's thinking in the twists and turns it imposes on us, and not forget that, in deploring them himself compared with an ideal of scientific discourse, he claims that he was forced into them by the object of his study."⁶² Lacan's oft-stated intent of a "return to Freud" marks an attempt to follow the delicate turns in Freud's thought, to move beyond the orthodoxy of Freudian analysts and appreciate the dynamism of Freud's pursuit of consciousness and subjectivity as problematic objects.

The twists and turns of Lacan's thought leading up to the final scene of ponderings and insights surrounding the *sinthome* can be laid out as following three general stages, each grounded upon a different approach in Lacanian analysis towards the theorization and treatment of the symptom. As Roberto Harari suggests, these three stages are "that of the interpreted symptom; that of the traversed fantasy; and that of the *sinthome* as identification."⁶³ I begin this chapter by laying out these two first stages of Lacan's theorization of the symptom in order to then establish the *sinthome*, in the proper context of its origins, as a turn towards a new set of problems and goals. Following from this, my discussion of the *sinthome* more carefully elaborates several ideas presented in my previous chapter, namely, the Lacanian sense of the relationship between truth and the Real, the function (or dysfunction) of God in language involving the Name-of-the-Father (NF), and the *sinthome* as a new interpretation of the stakes, mechanisms, and outcomes of the liberation of desire involved in sublimation. The articulation of these ideas in the present chapter will lay the groundwork for a close reading of Nietzsche in

⁶² Jacques Lacan, "The Direction of the Treatment and the Principles of Its Power," in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 518.

⁶³ Harari, 221.

my third chapter, where I examine Nietzsche's tragic and Dionysian theory of self-overcoming in its relationship to Lacan's theory of the *sinthome*.

2.2 The two early phases of Lacan's treatment of the symptom

In Lacan's early thought, a symptom, simply put, is a demand to desire and enjoy an object in a disturbing way that is expressed or felt in the egoic consciousness of the Imaginary but has an origin or mainspring in the Symbolic which cannot be traced or understood by its sufferer. Fink writes, "In Lacan's early work the goal of analysis for neurotics is to eliminate the interference in symbolic relations created by imaginary relations, in other words, to get imaginary interests out of the way so as to confront the analysand with his or her problems with the Other as such."⁶⁴ This suggests that the problems the subject grapples with at the level of inherited Symbolic prohibitions and demands are obfuscated by egoic experience. This obfuscation is possible on Lacan's view because the symptom, at this early stage of his thinking, has the structure of a metaphor to be deciphered. A symptomatic behaviour, be it an inappropriate response to certain stimuli, a compulsion to excessively repeat a certain action, or a disturbing pattern of thought that asserts itself repeatedly, plays out persistently because there exists in the unconscious some unattainable desire that approximates its satisfaction and relief through the metaphorical substitution of a symptom in place of proper satisfaction. The symptom, then, is merely a metaphorical substitute for a deeper yearning that the subject cannot face directly; this metaphorical substitution can be understood as repression in the Lacanian sense.

⁶⁴ Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 87.

In this period, which roughly runs from Lacan's first essays in the 1950s until his eleventh seminar in 1964, Lacan's clinical aim is to bring the neurotic sufferer to see through the metaphor of the symptom in order to recognize and name the pernicious desire that issues the symptom's irresistible demand. In an early 1957-58 paper that characterizes this stage of his thought Lacan offers the following:

The fact that the question of his existence envelops the subject, props him up, invades him, and even tears him apart from every angle, is revealed to the analyst by the tensions, suspense, and fantasies that he encounters. It should be added that this question is articulated in the Other in the form of elements of a particular discourse. It is because these phenomena are organized in accordance with the figures of this discourse that they have the fixity of symptoms and that they are legible and dissolve when deciphered.⁶⁵

A "discourse" in this context means a particular configuration of Symbolic exchange that produces desire. This passage shows that the subject's desperate attempts to achieve an ideal enjoyment of consistency and being are structured by the demands of the Other that circulate in discourse. These demands, for the most part, remain hidden in plain sight, veiled by a gloss of metaphor that allows a false semblance of sense and unity to be afforded to the experience of the everyday. The inconsistency of such demands (for example, the simultaneous demands that a woman be both classically feminine and worthy of fascination, such that one must, impossibly, be womanly without being plain or "basic," while also exuding a pleasing novelty that is neither unwomanly nor butch) ensures that some of these ideals will be unrealizable and lead to the compensatory response of symptom formation. So long as such a symptom has the structure of a

⁶⁵ Lacan, "Question," 459.

metaphor to be deciphered, Lacan believes neurotics can dissolve the symptom by decoding and recognizing the demands that structure their desire.

In the next phase of Lacan's thought, beginning roughly with his eleventh seminar in 1964, the goal of analysis is no longer to decipher the metaphor of the symptom, but rather to "traverse the fantasy" that undergirds and surrounds it.⁶⁶ The impetus for this shift in his thinking is the realization that the dissolution of any one symptom is far from the most fruitful result of psychoanalytic therapy. Instead, Lacan asks, how could someone be brought to the point where becoming caught in the mire of an indecipherable symptom would no longer be a threat, and what method of approach would this require? It is useful here to evoke a well-known statement of Freud's, "*Wo es war, soll Ich werden,*" "Where it was, I shall be." Freud's "*es*" and "*Ich*" have traditionally been translated into English as "id" and "ego." This corresponds to the common interpretation of Freud that suggests egoic consciousness should be strengthened to take over regions and processes of thought previously dominated by the unconscious, the latter being the psychological "it" in the sense of "not *me*, the ego." What Lacan aims at through the traversal of the subject's fantasy, though, is *not* the strengthening of the ego, but rather a new way of responding to the dominance of the Other in the unconscious. In philosophical terms, Lacan's path is closer to a more literal translation of Freud's statement above, as the latter uses the verb "*werden,*" "to become," rather than "*sein,*" "to be." Thus, to render Freud's phrase differently, one could phrase the Lacanian dictum as "where it [the unconscious] was, there I shall *become,*" with *become* indicating not the illusory sense of completeness after which the ego strives, but a continual and dynamic

⁶⁶ Commentators afford the phrase "traversal of fantasy" more importance than Lacan does himself, but the phrase appears in the seminars for the first time in the final sessions of *Seminar XI*.

process of becoming and change that negotiates between the problematic forces of the ego and the unconscious alike.

This new end of analysis is to be realized through the traversal of the subject's fundamental fantasy, which, by Lacan's lights, is the fundamental structure of *jouissance* and desire involved in the God hypothesis I discussed in my previous chapter. The subject believes that they have been unfairly severed from an ideal state of being and enjoyment, and the fundamental fantasy is that this state can ultimately be recovered through acceding to the Other's demands.⁶⁷ Fink describes the traversal of this fantasy as follows: "Neurosis is maintained in discourse, and we see in Lacan's notion of traversing fantasy the suggestion of a kind of beyond of neurosis in which the subject is able to act (as cause, as desirousness), and is at least momentarily out of discourse, split off from discourse: free from the weight of the Other."⁶⁸ Discourse, in Lacan's thinking, always refers to a structure in the circulation of meaning, and the possible *jouissance* derived therefrom, which must be understood as a "social link" in the sense that it organizes identification and desire at an interpersonal level. Lacan writes, "the notion of discourse should be taken as a social link, founded on language, and thus seems not unrelated to what is specified in linguistics as grammar."⁶⁹ This evocation of grammar gestures towards the way that any discourse succeeds in erecting its own logic or truth, engendering a phallic satisfaction that is derived from participating in and perpetuating a particular organization of language, meaning, and identity. This stands in metaphorical relation to grammar, as the rules of the game in any particular discourse are intuitive, i.e.

⁶⁷ I have borrowed this particular formulation from Matthew Sharpe, "Jacques Lacan," *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed November, 2019, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/lacweb/>.

⁶⁸ Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 66.

⁶⁹ Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 17.

unconscious, and develop over time in ways that are, like grammar, organic and subject to the accumulation of contradictory exceptions. These rules regulate a certain arrangement of the relationship of *jouissance* to language that remains hidden from Imaginary experience until it is forced into the open. Fink argues, “Every discourse requires a loss of *jouissance* and has its own mainspring or truth (often carefully dissimulated). Each discourse defines that loss differently, starting from a different mainspring.”⁷⁰ The “loss of *jouissance*” required by participation in a particular discourse mirrors the initial loss of *jouissance* in the inauguration of language, where the ideal of unmediated satiety in union with the mother is interrupted by a new law regulating access to *jouissance*. The satiety of desire is interrupted by the imposition of the rules of a new linguistic game that must be played to access the enjoyment it promises. Just as in the case of the infant, the *jouissance* sacrificed in discourse is not recovered for the Imaginary ego, but rather trapped in the unconscious machinations of discourse such that it binds the subject to them unwittingly. The satisfaction of discourse is, for this reason, *Symbolic*.

As for the “cause” of desire, this is the false truth or justification experienced at the level of the Imaginary that each discourse offers concerning the motivation and justification of its imposition. In the discourse of the Oedipal scene of the Symbolic mother and father, the perceived object of desire, or “object-cause” of the new regulation of *jouissance*, is the Symbolic power and *jouissance* that knowledge of language and sociality promise to deliver back into the infant’s life. The truth of this first discourse is that the infant is rendered as perpetually lacking, bound to attempt in vain to fill the gaps

⁷⁰ Bruce Fink, “The Master Signifier and the Four Discourses,” in *Key Concepts of Lacanian Analysis*, ed. Dany Nobus (New York: Other Press), 44.

of imperfection that will ultimately prevent the egoic self, no matter how complete it may become, from having access to the ideal of unmediated *jouissance* from which it imagines it was severed.

If the traversal of fantasy is to arrive at “a kind of beyond of neurosis in which the subject is able to act (as cause, as desirousness)... free from the weight of the Other,”⁷¹ then it must consist in guiding the subject into awareness of the very problem of discourse and the demands of the Other. In order to be free of the weight of the Other, the subject must step outside of the safety of the ego and the calming satisfaction of Symbolic exchange in order to see and understand their very participation in discourse and symptom formation. When this is achieved, the ego and the unconscious alike have been “subjectivized,” in the sense that the complicity of the individual in arrangements of *jouissance* and desire is unveiled. The result of this process, then, is that a subject armed with this new knowledge can have a chance to act as truly desirous, as the cause and actualization of their own desire, free from the demands of discourse and the Other. Since this describes the successful end of an analysis, any example of such a transformation would necessarily be grounded in the particularities of the analysand’s life and world. Still, one might imagine a person who comes to understand that some central desire in their life, say, monetary success at the expense of personal fulfilment, is in fact not something that is truly expected of them by any authorities other than those they have internalized and, in fact, *enjoyed* at some level. What must occur in the psychoanalytic clinic between analyst and analysand to achieve such a shift is the working through of the analysand’s fantasies of enjoyment, recognition, shame, guilt, and so on, until the

⁷¹ Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 66.

analysand's symptomatic relationship to desire and Symbolic relations can be revealed as a *process* and *practice* that they have actively participated in.

In the move from the first to the second stage of Lacan's response to the problem of the symptom one can trace a movement from a more localized theory and practice to a more generalized one, from the deciphering and dissolution of the symptom as an immediate personal ailment to the goal of producing a change in the subject's overall awareness of the operations of language and desire. This marks a shift in Lacan's thinking from an original focus on the egoic relations and structures of the Imaginary to one concerned with the larger relationships between the subject and forces of language seated in the register of the Symbolic.⁷² Along this same trajectory, Lacan's final turn towards the *sinthome* can likewise be characterized as a shift of focus towards the register of the Real, particularly concerning the Real's crucial relationship to truth and the psychological process of "foreclosure" normally associated with psychosis.

2.3 The Real of psychosis

Before his theorization of the *sinthome*, Lacan takes the primary mechanism of neurosis to be the repression of desire in the sense of metaphorical substitution discussed above, while he distinguishes psychosis through its rootedness in the mechanism of foreclosure. He writes,

I teach that the Other is the locus of the kind of memory [Freud] discovered by the name "unconscious," memory that he regards as the object of a question that has remained

⁷² Adrian Johnston, "Jacques Lacan," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, last modified Fall 2018, accessed November, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/lacan/>.

unanswered, insofar as it conditions the indestructibility of certain desires... It is an accident in this register and in what occurs in it – namely, the foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father in the place of the Other – and the failure of the paternal metaphor that I designate as the defect that gives psychosis its essential condition, along with the structure that separates it from neurosis.⁷³

In this theory of psychosis, the NF is ejected from the Symbolic by the mechanism of foreclosure. As Russel Grigg suggests, “what is foreclosed is not the possibility of an event's coming to pass, but the very signifier, or signifiers, that makes the expression of impossibility possible... Thus, 'foreclosure' refers not to the fact that a speaker makes a statement which declares something impossible... but to the fact that the speaker lacks the very linguistic means for making the statement at all.”⁷⁴ In this way, the foreclosure of the NF must be understood as a refusal so utterly final that there is simply no trace of the ejected signifier left in the Symbolic register, such that the signifier is completely missing.

The immediate consequences of this foreclosure are twofold. First, the formation of language as a system of metaphor never gets off the ground. In all of Lacan's thought before the *sinthome*, this “failure of the paternal metaphor” results in the failure of metaphor writ large, as the original inauguration of desire by the NF as the *Non-du-père* and the regulative pursuit of phallic jouissance through Symbolic relations never takes place. The second consequence of the failure of the NF is that the *jouissance* of the individual remains unregulated. As articulated in my previous chapter, the reality

⁷³ Lacan, “Question,” 479.

⁷⁴ Russel Grigg, “From the Mechanism of Psychosis to the Universal Condition of the Symptom: On Foreclosure,” in *Key Concepts of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, ed. Dany Nobus (New York: Other Press, 1998), 49.

principle of the Other and the phallic *jouissance* it engenders achieve a kind of pacifying regulation of the subject. In Harari's words, "the Name-of-the-Father... like everything connected with the Symbolic, implies a calming effect."⁷⁵ In psychosis, however, the absence of any pacifying limit on *jouissance* routinely leads to torturous and disastrous results. With no effective regulation of desire in place, no phallic mediation of the raw force of lived experience, the subject continuously experiences the full weight (or weightlessness) of the joy, pain, beauty, and horror of existence.

Where the Real fits into this account of psychosis is on the side of language that is not wholly meaningful and not exhausted by signification and the function of metaphor: the materiality of the letter. Fink writes that "the letter, in [Lacan's thought of] the 1970s... [is] the material, nonsignifying face of the signifier, the part that has effects without signifying: *jouissance* effects. The letter is related to the *materiality of language*."⁷⁶ In this theory of psychosis meaning has, in a sense, fallen away from language, but the materiality of language that remains is not without effects relating to *jouissance*. To quote Fink again,

[Words] may be strung together in perfectly ordinary ways by a psychotic, but they do not seem to affect him or her in any sense; they are somehow independent of him or her. Whereas a neurotic may, upon hearing an unusual term... be reminded of the first time he heard the word, who it was he learned it from, and so on, a psychotic may focus on its strictly phonetic or sonic aspect. He may see meaning in nothing, or find a purely personal meaning in virtually everything. Words are taken as things, as real objects.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Harari, 63.

⁷⁶ Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 119.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 75.

The “words” at play in this context are words as signifiers, bearers of meaning, and it is therefore the meaning effects of language that are missing in psychosis. As a material thing, though, the *letter* of the word is still encountered, only as something *Real*. This experience of language is available to everyone in day to day life in the circumstance of repeating a word until its meaning seems to fall away, while for the psychotic this may be the primary experience of language. As I will show, the experience of this material Real of language is a central aspect of *sinthomatic* subjectivity.

2.4 Lacanian “writing”: the Real and the limits of truth and meaning

The *sinthome* represents a significant turning point in Lacan’s work in several ways, especially in light of the trajectory of the first two phases of Lacan’s treatment of the symptom outlined above. As Dylan Evans suggests, “Whereas Lacan had seen the symptom in the 1950’s as a message to be deciphered and dissolved, the *sinthome* designates a signifying formulation beyond analysis, a kernel of enjoyment immune to the efficacy of the symbolic.”⁷⁸ As Evans’ formulation implies, the *sinthome* represents a kind of freedom from the strictures of the Symbolic. Since the Symbolic is the register where knowledge of the Other’s demands for being, meaning, and identification are encoded, the freedom of the *sinthome* involves the manipulation and overcoming of the limits of the possible set by Symbolic law and the reality principle, and therefore amounts to a manipulation of the Real. This process of playing with the limits of meaning and truth through the manipulation of the Real is what is known as “writing” in its specifically Lacanian sense, which is centrally important because the *sinthome* is

⁷⁸ Evans, 13.

characterized throughout *Seminar XXIII* as something that is “written” or “forged.” Since such acts of “writing” are the central mechanism of the achievement of sinthomatic subjectivity they must be understood not only in their relationship to the ethics of sublimation, but also in terms of their relation to the psyche and the structure of truth itself.

The ethical character of the *sinthome*, as I have mentioned, should be understood as Lacan’s elaboration of his earlier theory of sublimation. In both cases, the sense of ethics involved consists in the defiant act of choosing the inherent danger of creative desire over the calming satisfaction of the Symbolic. Evans writes, “not all human decisions are governed by a ‘rational’ calculation in which potential pleasure is weighed against potential pain... The deal of [non-phallic] *jouissance* is not always rejected... [such] *jouissance* would be located on the side of the ethical, ‘given that *jouissance* implies precisely the acceptance of death.’”⁷⁹ The defiant affirmation of desire and *jouissance* beyond the safety of the established Symbolic order involves the risk of pain, chaotic tension, and the “death” or dissolution of the ego’s safe havens of identification. It is because such acts involve risk and the sacrifice of safety in the name of change and freedom that these acts have an ethical character.

It is, however, important to note that “we must not simply confuse *jouissance* with the pursuit of death or masochism... The increase of tension does not necessarily imply suffering, just as its diminution does not always lead to a feeling of well-being.”⁸⁰ The relation between the reality principle’s placations and the acceptance of a kind of death (or, as I will explain later, *unknotting*) is not so clear-cut as a choice between

⁷⁹ Evans, 7.

⁸⁰ Harari, 110.

comfort and pain. The remarkable prose of James Joyce, the central inspiration and case study of *Seminar XXIII*, indicates to Lacan a kind of *jouissance* far beyond the reaches of the Symbolic order and its strict laws of meaning and identity. In keeping with the idea that the chaos of *jouissance* beyond the Symbolic is not necessarily painful, Harari notes that Joyce's own journey into *sinthomatic* consciousness was far from horrific: "as he wrote, he allegedly laughed continually, showed unbridled *jouissance*."⁸¹ This is in stark contrast to Harari's own account of experiences beyond Symbolic mediation, as he writes, "Reality is centered on what is collective, what is codified somewhere between the Symbolic and the Imaginary, what allows us to establish forms of agreement and consensus. In this sense, reality is asleep – it keeps us in a sort of comfortable haze, from which we are torn by the Real, which wakes us screaming."⁸² In this sense, the ethical stance of the *sinthome* stages an encounter with unmediated *jouissance* and the Real of language that, while threatening to Symbolic senses of identity, has the potential to be *joyous*, and it is the subject's rebellious insistence on the possibility of such joy that gives the *sinthome* its ethical character.

The encounter with the Real of language just described must be understood in its relation to the new role taken on by foreclosure in Lacan's theorization of the *sinthome*. As Russel Grigg writes, "What is of particular interest in the discussion of Joyce is that it presents a new theory, according to which foreclosure is the universal condition of the symptom."⁸³ Whereas previously Lacan treats the root of the symptom as a *repressed* node in the Symbolic register of the neurotic, stood in for by the metaphorical symptom

⁸¹ Harari, 81.

⁸² Harari, 7.

⁸³ Grigg, 70.

that manifests in conscious experience, in *Seminar XXIII* Lacan reconsiders the root of the symptom writ large to be *foreclosure*, thus conceiving this root as *beyond* the Symbolic. The *sinthome* represents a shift in Lacan's thinking in which the boundary between psychosis and neurosis has been blurred to the point of non-existence. Lacan offers the following:

How is it that any of us can help feeling that the words on which we depend are in some sense imposed upon us? It is precisely in this respect that he who is called ill sometimes goes further than he who is called a man of sound mind. Rather, the question is why a normal man, a man said to be normal, doesn't notice that speech is a parasite, that speech is a veneer, that speech is a form of cancer that afflicts the human being? How is it that there are some who go so far as to sense this? It's quite certain that Joyce affords us a little inkling of this.⁸⁴

The "parasite" of speech, the "veneer" of discourse that regulates desire and metes out enjoyment according to Symbolic law, is an *affliction*, and one which produces a psychotic (or *prepsychotic*⁸⁵) relationship to language in everyone. The above passage plays on Lacan's earlier theorizations of the psychotic experience of speech as "imposed," in the sense that language is often experienced in psychosis as an otherworldly emanation from the Real that has a sort of logic and materiality beyond ordinary meaning. By the time of *Seminar XXIII*, Lacan starts to think of this as the *general* experience of language, but one that goes unnoticed by those "said to be normal," while those "called ill" tend to recognize it for what it is. There is a strong parallel here

⁸⁴ Lacan, *Seminar XXIII*, 78.

⁸⁵ The psychosis of what might normally be termed a "psychotic episode," or triggered psychosis, is differentiated in Lacan's thought from the prepsychotic structure of foreclosure that precipitates such a breakdown.

to Nietzsche's suggestion that the death of God goes unrecognized by the great majority, especially since he describes the proclaimer and narrator of this event as a "madman." When Lacan takes the mechanism of foreclosure as the basis of the ordinary structure of subjectivity, language itself becomes what one might call a "fundamental symptom," a parasitic demand for meaning that harbors a hidden problem of the failure of meaning that is recognized only by a "mad" few.

The issue of ethical defiance and the generalization of foreclosure are both at play in Lacan's move from a three- to a four-register psyche, represented by his work in *Seminar XXIII* with the Borromean knot. This topological figure is taken from the image of the Borromeo family crest, depicting three rings that bind each other together in a symmetrical triad, and is used by Lacan to represent his theory of the three-register psyche. When one considers any two of the three rings in this structure, which represent the registers of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real, one finds that they are held in contact with each other only by the third. As such, if any of the three rings in the structure fail in the sense of being broken or cut then all three come loose from one another. For Lacan, such an unknotting of the Borromean topology of the registers represents the precipitation of psychosis in the sense that the registers still produce effects on language, desire, and identity but lack the coordination necessary for livable subjectivity. The merging of the theory of the symptom with the mechanism of foreclosure mentioned above is accompanied in *Seminar XXIII* by Lacan's suggestion that "paranoid psychosis and personality as such do not have any relationship, for the simple reason that they are one and the same thing. In so far as a subject knots together as three, the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real, he is supported only by their

continuity. The imaginary, the symbolic and the real are one and the same consistence, and it is in this that paranoid psychosis consists.”⁸⁶ Thus, at this juncture of Lacan’s thinking, the ordinary arrangement of the psyche as the linking together of the three registers is recognized as what is “called normal,” the symptomatic and prepsychotic state of suffering the parasite of language, and the function of the *sinthome* is to repair and transfigure this structure.

The prepsychotic structure of the three-register psyche is formulated in *SXXXIII* in two ways, both as the *standing apart* of the three rings of the Borromean link as *not yet linked*, and alternately as the *bleeding together* of the three registers as *continuous*, the former represented by three unlinked rings and the latter by the figure of the trefoil knot.⁸⁷ In both cases Lacan uses the introduction of a fourth element, the *sinthome*, to repair the topological problems of the knot in order to represent how the *sinthome* intervenes to allow the subject to function in a livable way. These two accounts should be treated as different attempts to convey the same root insight. In the case of the three unlinked rings Lacan suggests that “[i]t is not a break between the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real that defines perversion, it is that they already stand apart in such a way that a fourth term has to be supposed, which on this occasion is the *sinthome*.”⁸⁸ The “perversion” at play in this description evokes a frequent formulation of Lacan’s, “*père - version*,” a “version-of-the-father” or a “turning-towards-the-father.” As such, the above passage continues,

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁸⁷ The trefoil knot is the three-pointed symbol often used in Celtic Christian art to depict the holy trinity, which bears interesting connections to *Seminar XXIII*’s discussion of Joyce (the Irishman) and the themes of God and identity that I cannot properly elaborate here.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

I'm saying that what forms the Borromean link has to be supposed to be tetradic – that perversion merely means *version vers le père*, a version towards the father – and that all in all, the father is a symptom, or a *sinthome*, as you wish. The ex-sistence of the symptom is what is [implicated] by the very position that presupposes this enigmatic bond between the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real.⁸⁹

All of this amounts to the enshrining of a new tenet of Lacanian analysis: the foreclosure of the fundamental symptom of language means that it stands apart, or “ex-sists,”⁹⁰ from the three registers in such a way that it is capable of knotting them together. Moreover, by doing so it allows the subject to overcome the pre-psychotic symptom of language and bring it towards a condition of *sinthomatic livability*. It is worth noting here that what is ejected from the Symbolic as foreclosed, on this account, is the NF itself as the “the signifier of the Other qua locus of the law.” What this implies in *Seminar XXIII* is that the “failure of metaphor” Lacan previously associates with psychosis should be understood as the universal failure of the *generative, creative* powers of language, the ossification of metaphorical meaning into the experience of meaning as fixed, and hence the experience of language as parasitic, imposed, and emanating from some unnameable Real.

In the case of Joyce, and indeed in the case of anyone else who follows the path of the *sinthome*, the overcoming of the symptom of language through the forging of the *sinthome* involves the practice of “writing” gestured to above, which Lacan describes in terms of “art.” At the beginning of *Seminar XXIII*, Lacan states, “I am hereby announcing what this year shall be my examination of art. In what way is artifice expressly able to

⁸⁹ Ibid., 11.

⁹⁰ Lacan uses this term in its Heideggerian sense to suggest that the foreclosed “stands out from” the three other registers.

target what presents itself in the first instance as a symptom? In what way can art – the artisanal – foil, as it were, what imposes as a symptom? Namely, truth.”⁹¹ The imposition of symptomatic or prepsychotic language on the individual is overcome by the work that the artisanal is able to do on *truth*. The relation of the “art” of the *sinthome* to the topology of the Borromean knot and the possibility of writing involves the sense of the possible and the impossible at work in sublimation, but this is reconceived in *Seminar XXIII* as a manipulation of the Real in its connection to the “necessary,” the “impossible,” and the “contingent,” as I will explain in a moment. “Writing” in this sense is a process of manipulating the boundary of the Real in its intersection or link with the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the symptom / *sinthome*. As Harari notes, “it thus has nothing to do... with the imaginary scene that amounts to picking up a pen and writing.”⁹² Of course, the *effects* of the sense of writing at play in the theory of the *sinthome* do indeed have a direct bearing on such creative acts, though such practices are not immediately involved the sense of the writing of the *sinthome*.

Writing, for Lacan, involves the material side of language he describes as the “letter.” Lacan says that “[t]he written is in no way in the same register or made of the same stuff, if you’ll allow me this expression, as the signifier.”⁹³ In this sense, the manipulation of writing is not a process that produces or trades in ordinary constructions of meaning; it does not operate with signifiers. Instead, its target is the revelation and putting into motion of something of the Real, which always lies beyond the structures of meaning as their limit. Lacan argues, “Writing is of interest to me because I think it was

⁹¹ Lacan, *Seminar XXIII*, 14.

⁹² Harari, 322.

⁹³ Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 29.

through little bits of writing that, historically speaking, we entered the real, that is, that we stopped imagining. The real is upheld by writing little mathematical letters... *writing must always have something to do with the way that we set the knot down in written form.*"⁹⁴ This attempt to see beyond our systems of meaning through the manipulation of the letter, the material substance of language stripped of its "*signifiante*" or "signifierness," is what Lacan takes to be the very practice that makes a Borromean knot of four elements possible. As such, though this sense of writing stands outside or beyond everyday discourse, what can be written still bears the traces of these discourses' structures. Lacan says that "the letter is, radically speaking, an effect of discourse."⁹⁵ Thus, "That which is written – what would that be in the end? The conditions of *jouissance*."⁹⁶ Writing, for Lacan, is therefore a play with the limits of meaning and the structures of desire they condition.

The capacity of writing to reveal and manipulate such structural conditions of *jouissance* is bound up inextricably with its relation to Lacan's notions of *necessity* and *possibility*. In its simplest form, Lacan provides the following formula: "The necessary . . . is that which doesn't stop what? – being written... The necessary is linked to the impossible, and... 'doesn't stop not being written' is the articulation thereof."⁹⁷ In light of the related details above, the characterization of the necessary as that which doesn't stop being written means that the necessary denotes the guaranteed limits of meaning insofar as they are conditioned by the Other and the reality principle. The impossible, on the other hand, is that which simply *cannot be written*; within the logic of the reality

⁹⁴ Lacan, *Seminar XXIII*, 54. Emphasis added.

⁹⁵ Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 36.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

principle there is no way to conceive of the syntax of elements that might demonstrate such a possibility. Meanwhile, what the letter provides, especially those produced by psychoanalytic discourse and Lacanian topology, is the chance to write that which has not been written. Lacan explains: “The phallus – as analysis takes it up as the pivotal or extreme point of what is enunciated as the cause of desire – analytic experience stops not writing it. It is in this ‘stops not being written’ that resides the apex of what I have called contingency.”⁹⁸ In this way, Lacanian puts the elements produced by psychoanalytic discourse into play such that the unconscious logical elements of the structure of desire, as in the case of the phallus, can be conceived at all and represented as operative in the structures of *jouissance* and discourse. Psychoanalytic discourse, through its effects on what can be written, therefore renders contingent or possible that which seems impossible in other discourses.

The Borromean knot is thus a form of writing for Lacan. It stands at the edge of his thought and helps him to formalize unforeseen possibilities and impossibilities alike. As Luke Thurston suggests, the knot is meant to “open new theoretical possibilities and produce new styles of thinking,” but is also an attempt to “consolidate or verify certain aspects of the earlier theories” to the effect of “the de-stabilization of those theories and the introduction of unsettling new perspectives.”⁹⁹ It is held out from ordinary discourse, pushed beyond prior limits of thought towards new conceptions rendered possible by the manipulation or “writing” of the new letters produced by psychoanalytic discourse. In

⁹⁸ Ibid., 94.

⁹⁹ Luke Thurston, “Ineluctable Nodalities: On the Borromean Knot,” in *Key Concepts of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, ed. Dany Nobus (New York: Other Press, 1998), 143; Ibid., 140.

the context of *Seminar XXIII*, then, what are the specific manipulations and insights that this experimental writing amounts to?

Essentially, Lacan's topological experiments aim to demonstrate the possibility of naming the unnamable in a way that both reveals and mobilizes the structures of desire. What psychoanalytic discourse offers us is "a slight chance of finding out something about [the economy of *jouissance*], from time to time, by pathways that are essentially contingent."¹⁰⁰ Through the play of Borromean link-work and knot-writing, psychoanalytic discourse is able to gesture towards the hold that discourses have on the subject and demonstrate that the "truths" by which the subject lives are the result of such structures of language. Lacan argues, "Once one enters into the register of the true, one can no longer exit it. In order to relegate the truth to the lowly status it deserves, one must have entered into analytic discourse. What analytic discourse dislodges puts truth in its place, but does not shake it up. It is reduced, but indispensable."¹⁰¹ What psychoanalytic discourse affords is the opportunity to say the truth about truth while nonetheless remaining bound to some level of the mobilization of one's *jouissance* by language. In Lacan's words, "What does it mean to speak the truth about truth... It means to do what I have effectively done, and nothing more – to track the real, which consists, which ex-sists, only in the knot."¹⁰² This, of course, must be taken in the context of his statement that "[t]o say the truth about truth is to say that it's a lie."¹⁰³ Lacan indicates that the lived realities structured by discourse are as dissimulative as they are manipulative, but also that we are nonetheless as unable to uncouple ourselves from

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 116.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 108.

¹⁰² Lacan, *Seminar XXIII*, 52.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 132.

the symptomatic effects of discourse completely as we are unable to free ourselves from language as such. This logic is in agreement with Nietzsche's suggestion that the illusions of truth, though they become harmful when their inherent artistry is forgotten, nonetheless remain necessary. The question, then, is what one might be able to *do* with the symptomatic structure of language when the artistry of writing and truth are recovered.

2.5 The writing of the *sinthome* and the liberation of desire

The *sinthome*'s origins lie in the fundamental symptom of language. "*Sinthome*" is the original spelling of the word symptom at the time that it was first brought into the French language from its Greek root.¹⁰⁴ What Lacan gains from returning to this archaic form of the word is, primarily, a strategy to put a well-worn and orthodoxy-laden concept of his field to new work. Moreover, this new term enables extended word play based on its altered spelling and pronunciation. In this sense, then, Lacan traces the term "symptom" back to its origins, and by doing so makes possible a play of meanings that defies and surpasses those coded into the original signifier, leaving the fixity of its original signifying structure behind. This shift mirrors the process that the move from the symptom to the *sinthome* follows for the analysand in Lacan's clinical practice. The problem of the symptom is overcome not by *dissolving* the symptom, but by coding it with new meanings that turn it into something freshly productive, by effectively *rewriting* it as affirmative and coming to identify with it as essential to a free and creative experience of desire.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 3.

Lacan speaks in *Seminar XXIII* of the roots of the *sinthome* in the fault of the symptom, and the latter's relationship to necessity and possibility. He says, "This is the fault, the *sin*, which my *sinthome* advantageously starts with. In English, *sin* refers to the trespass of original sin, hence the *necessity* of the fact that the fault-line that is always growing *doesn't stop*, unless it should undergo the *stop* of castration as *possible*."¹⁰⁵ The *sinthome* begins with original sin, the fissure or fault-line in the psyche set off by the fall from fantasized unity with one's mother into the *necessary* state of trying to appease the Other through the acquisition of language. In a twist on his prior formulations of possibility and necessity Lacan says, "I said in the past that this *possible is what stops being written*... a comma has to be included here. The *possible is what stops, comma, being written*. Or rather, *what would stop, taking the path of being written*."¹⁰⁶ This is a reference to his previous definition of the *contingent* (that which stops *not* being written) with the new twist that the writing of the possible puts a *stop* to something else. One can make sense of this in light of the generalization of foreclosure outlined above. If the originary foreclosure at the root of the symptom renders the latter as missing from the possibilities of language, then this root remains *impossible* in the sense of being perpetually *unwritten*. *Being written*, the root of the symptom would seem to be brought back into the realm of the possible, thereby *stopping* the fault-line of the symptom from growing and plaguing the individual.

Everything in this account hinges upon the particular way the *sinthome* is to be *written*. Lacan's introductory session of *Seminar XXIII* addresses Socrates' famous refusal to accept an easy way out of his trial, suggesting that Socrates does this in order to

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 5.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

avoid dividing the city of Athens. As a result of this refusal Socrates becomes *singular*. Lacan says, “it has to be said that Socrates *is not* a man, because he agrees to die so that the city will live on... *anything, but not that*. This was precisely Socrates’ position. The *but not that* is what, under this year’s title, I’m introducing as the *sinthome*.”¹⁰⁷ Given that Lacan also announces the *sinthome* as a form of art, both art and the defiant stance of “but not that” must be seen as two sides of a single idea. Harari suggests that the becoming-singular of Socrates through the ethical act of refusal hinges upon the difference between singularity and particularity.¹⁰⁸ In this sense, the ethical stance of refusal entailed by the *sinthome* should be read as the refusal to remain merely a particular instantiation of the general structures of meaning and *jouissance* in favour of achieving an arrangement of *jouissance* that is wholly unique. Harari describes the “but not that” as “a domain of secrets... a privacy necessarily kept apart from a phallic logic... a *confrontation with demand*... a reaction, the beginning of an escape from the subjection to the neurotic symptom – regarding which the *sinthome*, in its singularity, would entail a break from these subjective positions.”¹⁰⁹ In Lacan’s terms, this refusal is the inception of a form of heresy in the face of the demands of the Other. He says, “it’s a fact that Joyce makes a choice, and in this regard he is, like me, a heretic. For *haeresis* [originally meaning *choice*], is precisely what specifies the heretic. One has to choose the path by which to capture the truth.”¹¹⁰

If the choice to say “anything, but not that” to the general structure of *jouissance* demanded by the Other is a heretical act that sets off the beginning of an escape from the

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 6.

¹⁰⁸ Harari, 30.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 32-33.

¹¹⁰ Lacan, *Seminar XXIII*, 7.

parasitic symptomatology of language, then the inscription of a new arrangement of *jouissance* through the artisanal know-how of writing is what carries this event through to the realization of the *sinthome*. This process of writing does not take place in a strictly rational fashion; phallic rationality, representing the systems of meaning coded in the Other, is overtaken in this process by *savoir-faire*, a know-how that finds its roots in the secrecy of the “but not that.” As Lacan claims, “Joyce didn’t know that he was fashioning the *sinthome*... He was oblivious to it and it is by dint of this fact that he is a pure artificer, a man of *savoir-faire*, which is what is likewise known as an artist.”¹¹¹ What is instead involved in the craftsmanship of this know-how is emphasized by Harari to center upon “knowing oneself to be the cause or origin of a thing,” to be a thing’s author: “An author is thus someone who causes something, but at the same time someone skilled in obtaining what he desires. This implies a certain acceptance of one’s own desire, such that the subject becomes... a heretic, one who chooses.”¹¹²

Becoming the author of one’s *sinthome* and desire mobilizes *savoir-faire*, and, for Lacan, this indicates a level of *responsibility*: “One is only responsible within the limits of one’s *savoir-faire*. What is *savoir-faire*? It is art, artifice, that which endues a remarkable quality to the art of which one is capable, because there is no Other of the Other to perform the Last Judgment. At least, so say I.”¹¹³ By “Other of the Other” Lacan means the function of God in language discussed in my previous chapter, in the sense that the symptomatic character of language leads the subject to experience meaning as fixed by an assumed divine authority. This Other of the Other could only be God,

¹¹¹ Ibid., 99.

¹¹² Harari, 83; *ibid.*, 84.

¹¹³ Lacan, *Seminar XXIII*, 47.

who, because he is *dead*, leaves the sinthomatic individual the responsibility of judging the value and validity of the configurations of desire and meaning they write.

Additionally, with the awakening of sinthomatic *savoir-faire* one finds oneself responsible, in the sense of being capable of responding defiantly when faced with the demands of the Other.¹¹⁴ Such know-how, as Harari points out, “does not involve learning a skill, but sorting something out, getting rid of a burden or irritation. It thus implies an unknotting or *denouement*.”¹¹⁵

In rewriting one’s relation to language through the forging of the *sinthome*, one rewrites one’s language itself in a significant sense: “the tongue that one does effectively speak... one creates this tongue.”¹¹⁶ This is supported by Lacan’s crucial belief that “there is no collective unconscious... only particular unconsciouses to the extent that every single one of us, from one instant to the next, gives a little nudge to the tongue we speak.”¹¹⁷ Indeed, if it is within the know-how of the individual to bring the symptom of language to the level of the *sinthome*, this same know-how supports the production of new meanings in an everyday sense. The significance of the *sinthome* is the capacity it has to *foreclose* meanings that one finds repressive or binding, and to make up for their lack through the production of new meanings. Harari suggests that “by foreclosing meaning that is congealed or frozen, I am able to engender new, unprecedented meanings.”¹¹⁸ All of this comes back to the relationship that the individual has to the Name-of-the-Father. Lacan offers the following: “The hypothesis of the unconscious...

¹¹⁴ Harari, 115.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 121. N.B.: “*Nœud*” is the French equivalent of the English “knot,” and so Lacan’s French term for unknotting, “*denouement*” carries the additional sense of “outcome” associated with *denouement* in the context of storytelling.

¹¹⁶ Lacan, *XXIII*, 114.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Harari, 301.

is something that can only hold up by presupposing the Name-of-the-Father.

Presupposing the Name-of-the-Father, which is certainly God, is how psychoanalysis, when it succeeds, proves that the Name-of-the-Father can just as well be bypassed. One can just as well bypass it, on the condition that one make use of it.”¹¹⁹ If the Name-of-the-father is bypassed as foreclosed, then how can one make use of it? One *makes up for it* by putting its position in the psyche to use through the act of naming.

Naming, or nomination, is the creative act of constructing signifiers anew, or of rewriting existing ones such that their meaning has been significantly reworked, as in Lacan’s writing of the Real and his transition from the symptom to the *sinthome*. Insofar as the Symbolic father is the father of the name, the force at play in the unconscious in the introduction of the originary signifier of the NF, all of the other signifiers in language gesture, in a sense, to this original signifier and the organization of desire that it engenders. This is what is at play in the *père-version* of the generalized prepsychotic/symptomatic psyche. By taking up the power of sinthomatic consciousness as a know-how and a *right* to challenge this order, the making (or unmaking) of meaning in the play of language falls to each individual subject. Harari characterizes the act of naming as “suppletion,” a translation of the French “*suppléance*” that appears throughout *Seminar XXIII*, but that is rendered in the English translation by the phrase “to make up for”:

“Suppletion does not consist of a replacement, but the addition of something new... it is possible to give language a little nudge on condition that one dispenses, for instance, with strict syntax, precise vocabulary, dictionary definitions, and in particular the foreclosure of puns... This moving away from the imperious rules of language... is the origin of the

¹¹⁹ Lacan, *Seminar XXIII*, 116.

phenomenon of suppletion.”¹²⁰ In this sense, suppletion is the act of writing over the position of the NF with new rules regarding the limits of meaning, new signifiers that engender unique organizations of the relationship of *jouissance* to language. Or, as Thurston notes, “Joyce’s writing effects a suppletion, makes up for the failure of the knot to cohere, by reconstituting the knot as well as the place it allows the subject.”¹²¹

Thus, Joyce’s creative ability to step beyond the stability of meaning involves a process in which he rewrites the significance of his relationship to the Symbolic father of language, and he does so by writing a proper name for himself, a new *ego*. As Harari argues, “making a proper name for oneself involves an artifice of pure, mental *jouissance* and a belief in being. There is One, a singular beyond any context; a *sinthomatic* identification with the ‘Old artificer’ whom we read about in the closing lines of *A Portrait*.”¹²² Joyce’s fundamental suppletive nomination was, in fact, the rewriting of the signifier *Joyce*, the name shared between the father who was unable to secure him in an ordinary organization of *jouissance* and the figure he himself wanted to become in the world of letters. The closing lines of *A Portrait* read: “Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race... Old father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead.”¹²³ Of this passage, Lacan says: “The *Portrait*... ends with *the uncreated conscience of my race*, with respect to which he calls upon the father par excellence, who would be his father, when in fact this artificer is he. He is the one who

¹²⁰ Harari, 305.

¹²¹ Thurston, 157.

¹²² Harari, 351.

¹²³ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man and Dubliners*, ed. George Stade (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004), 225.

knows, who knows what he has to do.”¹²⁴ The identification with the “One,” with the artificer of the world, is the assumption of the responsibility of creation that is exercised in the act of nomination, the mainspring of *sinthomatic* creativity in a world where the truth of meaning has been wrested away from the grip of all ghostly fathers. For Joyce, this process takes place through the reconstruction of his name and ego.

The process of being led to the position of the *sinthome* takes place in the rewriting of the very knot of the subject’s psyche, such that the *sinthome* as the fourth element occupies a unique position that stitches together the disparate elements that were floating free, or, alternately, provides a true counterpoint to the psychotic continuity of the three registers of the trefoil. Lacan says that “in one way or another we teach the analysand to splice, to perform a splice between his *sinthome* and the parasitic real of *jouissance*. This is what typifies our operation.”¹²⁵ In this splicing, this unknotting and reknitting, the subject’s relationship to *jouissance* in language is rewritten. Through this process the subject, in a sense, “cancels his subscription to the unconscious.”¹²⁶ This psychological shift overcomes the demands of the Other to such a degree that even the demand for *meaning* has been fundamentally altered; the subject arrives at the point of knowing the truth about truth and rediscovering the powers of artistry in the domain of nomination. Meaning becomes a matter of knowing what satisfaction one desires from the play of discourse and the materiality of language alike and seeking configurations of language that can realize these desires. The *sinthome* becomes, rather than a site of trauma or a symptomatic fault-line, the very motor of a free and affirmative desire. Joyce

¹²⁴ Lacan, *Seminar XXIII*, 56.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 144.

stands as a paragon of this achievement but does not approach the exhaustion of its possible configurations; the *singularity* of each *sinthome* is paramount. As Harari states, the *sinthome* is not an attempt to produce clones of Joyce, but rather “an effort to bring about in the analysand an inventiveness. Or even better: poetry and inventiveness.”¹²⁷ For Lacan, this theory and the new practice it allows amount to the crowning achievement of his career as a thinker, the final elaboration of the central impetus of his project: “How then is the virus of the *sinthome* transmitted by means of the signifier... This is what I have attempted to explain throughout the whole course of my seminars.”¹²⁸ Psychoanalytic discourse renders the force of truth in all other discourses visible, and opens the possibility of an affirmative and *sinthomatic* relationship to language in place of one that is parasitic and symptomatic.

2.6 Conclusion

Lacan’s theory of the *sinthome* is an attempt to conceive of an artful and creative relationship to the limits of meaning that is capable of liberating desire by freeing subjectivity from an oppressive experience of truth. While his earlier clinical approach to the symptom as a metaphor concerns the subject’s participation in Imaginary fantasies of identity, just as the traversal of fantasy concerns participation in the Symbolic, the chief concern of the *sinthome* is to bring about a change in the subject’s participation in the Real as the boundary and limit of truth and meaning. This engagement with the Real consists in “speaking in order to name, rather than naming in order to appease a

¹²⁷ Harari, 359.

¹²⁸ This quote, from Lacan’s concluding talk at the Journées de Ecole Freudienne de Paris, July 9, 1978, appears translated in Harari, 210.

judgmental God,” such that Lacan’s teachings in the period of the *sinthome* focus on the subject’s creation of language and organizations of desire as an alternative to being used by language.¹²⁹

In this sense, the *sinthome* is ultimately a theory of how the subject is able to escape both the phallic function and God, the authoritarian father of language, by awakening the artistry of nomination. As Harari notes, “Nomination... encapsulates what we can posit as an alternative... for Freud everything is sustained by the function of the father; in fact, by precisely an eternal love for the father. By contrast, what Lacan advances... aims to do without the Name-of-the-Father on condition that it is put to use.”¹³⁰ By entering into an artistic relationship with truth and meaning the subject is able to overcome the pernicious authority of God (the order and fixity of meaning and the law that meaning be sought out and experienced only as the satisfaction of such an order) precisely by reclaiming this authority and putting it to use. The study of Joyce and his “attempt to liquidate the English language, as something self-contained or self-identical,”¹³¹ exemplified most dramatically by the prose of *Finnegans Wake*, allows Lacan to theorize this escape from the ordinary laws of language and the structures of desire they engender. While a suffering subject usually searches for the meaning of their symptom, thereby “searching for a master,” Joyce “undoes meaning,” and does so “[w]ithout any hesitation.”¹³²

Lacan postures psychoanalysis as an antidote to religion without much fanfare, but also without ambiguity: “our analytic appreciation of what is involved in the knot is

¹²⁹ Ibid., 28; *ibid.*, 300.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 347.

¹³¹ Ibid., 25.

¹³² Ibid., 230.

the negative of religion... we no longer believe in the object as such.”¹³³ What the writing of the knot reveals is that language is coded with a religious logic of being and truth, while the subject is always unknowingly involved in the construction and efficacy of truth: “What is a fact? It’s precisely his *doing*. There is only any fact due to the fact that the parlêtre says it... There is no fact but by dint of artifice.”¹³⁴ The liberation from the grip of the unconscious Other Lacan seeks to bring about is no less than a liberation from the traces of a tyrannical God in the psyche: “The Other, the Other as the locus of the truth, is the only place... that we can give to the term ‘divine being,’ God, to call him by his name... as long as things are said, the God hypothesis will persist.”¹³⁵ The arrangements of meaning and desire discourse engenders, which unconsciously indicate to the subject a higher order and ultimate *jouissance* of some Other, continually reproduce a kind of unconscious religious faith in being and identity. Lacan’s attempt to wrest away the many masks of this Other, to draw back the curtain on language, amounts to an attempt to exorcise this father through the very writing of God *as the Other*. In Lacan’s words, “It seems clear to me that the Other – put forward at the time of ‘The Instance of the Letter’ as the locus of speech – was a way, I can’t say of laicizing, but of exorcising the good old God.”¹³⁶

Crucially though, one must keep in mind that Lacan’s dismissal of a collective unconscious means that the fundamental symptomatic experience of language, while universal, is different for each subject. This means that the ghostly father of language has

¹³³ Lacan, *Seminar XXIII*, 26.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 52. “Parlêtre” is a term Lacan coins in the 1970s to describe linguistic subjectivity, ordinarily translated as “speaking-being.” This word play has several valences: the sense of a being who speaks, the sense of the event of seeking and constructing being through speech, as well as the pun “*par lettre*.”

¹³⁵ Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 45.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

a *different name* for each subject, and, therefore, that the new arrangements of meaning and desire involved in the forging of a *sinthome* will always be *singular*. Joyce's attempt to liquidate the English language and his dramatic refusal of almost any stability of meaning is only *one* singular example of sinthomatic consciousness. For others, the transfiguration of language involved in escaping from the fantasy of the ultimate being or fixity of meaning can just as well allow for the production of "new, unprecedented meanings" that, while free from any fantasy of perfect self-identity or permanence, nonetheless pursue a glimmer of being while affirming the inevitability of change. Indeed, the very act of nomination in the theory of the *sinthome* entails such change in the sense that nomination perpetually unknots and reknits the subject's relationship to meaning and desire in the pursuit of novel configurations. This perpetual process of the subject's self-transfiguration, as my next chapter will show, is strikingly complemented and exemplified by Nietzsche's tragic theory of self-overcoming and his nominative writing of the figure of Dionysus. As Harari writes, "The subject of the symptom... is a barred or divided subject, one who says: 'I do not wish to be like this,' 'I do not wish to have that,' or, indeed, 'I cannot go on living like this.' Conversely, one is sure that 'one cannot live without' the *sinthome*."¹³⁷ As I will explore in my next chapter, the perpetual play of meaning enabled by the sinthomatic writing and rewriting of the limits of meaning was precisely what Nietzsche could not live without.

¹³⁷ Harari, 358-359.

Chapter Three: Nietzsche and the Tragic Artifice of Affirmation

3.1: Introduction

Nietzsche's thought, as I have argued previously, largely consists of an attempt to establish a new ground for human values, a new health of desire and creativity capable of overcoming the problem of nihilism and the death of God. This chapter will articulate Nietzsche's approach to this problem while also elucidating the ways his thought can be taken as a kind of symptomatic artifice.

As discussed in my first chapter, Nietzsche takes serious issue with the central philosophical disposition of the Western tradition, what he refers to as "metaphysics," due to its reliance on a Platonic conceptualization of being and identity that eschews the aesthetic character of existence in favour a religious logic of truth as universal, eternal, and self-identical. This kind of metaphysics, Nietzsche argues, functions as a ubiquitous logic of human discourse and binds people to false senses of identity that, while useful and beneficial in certain ways, become increasingly hollow and entrenched over the course of history. As Themis puts it, "[projecting] imaginary 'realities' into nature... occurs because such imaginaries seem to soothe our fears with pleasing thoughts... unfortunately, however, such imaginaries are also found to ossify across time and create a *barrier* towards desire. This barrier causes what for Nietzsche is expressly the neurosis or nihilism of a morality that turns against life."¹³⁸ The crisis of nihilism that Nietzsche's thought so often addresses is, he thinks, the inevitable outcome of this historical legacy of Platonic-Christian metaphysics; the values and ideals that metaphysics both enable and demand have lost much of their beneficial character and threaten to become so deeply

¹³⁸ Themis, 129-130.

entrenched that all possibility of creation in the domain of values may soon be irrevocably lost and the reign of the “last man” will become complete. In Nietzsche’s words, “What does nihilism mean? *That the highest values devalue themselves.* The aim is lacking; ‘why?’ finds no answer.”¹³⁹ As a thinker, then, Nietzsche seeks not only to intervene on discourses concerning truth and identity at the level of conceptual understanding, but also to leverage this intervention to open and mobilize new experiences of meaning and desire.

Crucially, Nietzsche’s great challenge in this vein is to find a way to loosen the grip of metaphysical conceptualizations of being without simply falling into a trap of insurmountable nihilism. Rather than emphasizing any final transience of things, Nietzsche concerns himself with precisely the “*approximation of a world of becoming to a world of being,*”¹⁴⁰ the possibility that human artifice is capable of producing for itself a kind of being, a perduring art that can overcome and colour in the emptiness of things and function as a ground of value. As Rathbone suggests, “Nietzsche should be appreciated as always *showing* in his style what he often says in his content, namely, that... we must come to see that we are wholes, despite being neither unities nor totalities.”¹⁴¹ The sense of being that Nietzsche strives after can, I will argue, be understood in thoroughly *sinthomatic* terms. Themis offers a suggestion of this sort at the end of his study of Nietzsche and Lacan, writing that one might “consider from the later Lacanian perspective whether Nietzsche’s final 1888 affirmation of the natural sciences, and simultaneously strident rejection of the Christian God, bears something of the

¹³⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 9.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 330.

¹⁴¹ Rathbone, 60.

psychotic's foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father, which could make of Nietzsche's writings before he succumbed to madness some kind of *sinthome*."¹⁴²

While I agree with Themis that the thought of the last decade of Nietzsche's creative life can be read in *sinthomatic* terms, my position is that such a reading is best unfolded through an examination of how Nietzsche's defining philosophical stance, his emphasis upon the *tragic* character of existence, can be shown to unfold *sinthomatic* themes and insights at the very heart of his thought. The thesis of this chapter, therefore, is that Nietzsche's thought as a whole unfolds a kind of *sinthomatic* artifice, and I will establish this reading at three levels of his writings: first, at the level of his theory or philosophy of linguistic subjectivity, second, at the personal level of his rewriting of the ancient Greek god Dionysus, and finally at the level his teaching of "self-overcoming" as a practice of liberating artifice he seeks to make possible for others. Each of these levels of his thought deeply mirrors and complements Lacan's conceptualization of the *sinthome* as a response to their shared diagnosis of modernity: the civilizational crisis of creativity in the domain of values.

The texts I focus on in the present chapter are mostly drawn from the last decade of Nietzsche's creative life, his "tragic" period of 1881 until his final mental collapse in early 1889. While such posthumous periodization of a thinker's life is always arbitrary to a degree, there are good reasons to focus on these last years of Nietzsche's creative output as a period distinct from the rest. First, many of his most central and influential ideas are either coined or properly elaborated for the first time in this period. These include his notions of the will to power, the overman, and the doctrine of the eternal

¹⁴² Themis, 133-134.

return of the same, all of which will be key parts of my analysis. Second, though Nietzsche never arrives at anything like a traditionally unified philosophical system, several of his earlier ideas nonetheless find a renewed and invigorated purpose through a kind of integration they achieve with the whole of his thought in this period.

Chief among the examples that might be offered in this vein is Nietzsche's treatment of Dionysus. In his 1872 book *The Birth of Tragedy (BT)*, Nietzsche investigates the artifice of ancient Greek tragedy to the effect of identifying two contrasting tendencies in this art, the Apolline and the Dionysian. In this context, he suggests, the god Apollo represents the light of clarity, individuation, and identity, and therefore the very capacity and power of artistic image-crafting. In opposition to this tendency, the god Dionysus manifests in tragedy as the chaos and darkness of unbridled passion that exists behind the Apolline veil of identity, at once generative and destructive. These two forces, then, bear significant similarity to the general schema of the divided subject in psychoanalysis, with the Apolline standing as the necessary Imaginary experience of ego and identity and the Dionysian representing the ever-present threat of the irruption of an unconscious Real. After *BT* Dionysus falls mostly into the background of Nietzsche's thought until he reappears as a central figure in *The Gay Science* in 1882, after which he remains a central motif until (and even after) the final days of Nietzsche's sanity. In this period, though, as I will discuss in detail in section 3.3, Dionysus paradoxically embodies both the tragedy of becoming and the hope of a new sense of being that creative subjectivity enables.

In a similar fashion to this rebirth of Dionysus, the idea of self-overcoming is nascent in Nietzsche's early thought but comes into its fullness only as a *tragic* thought

and practice. One of Nietzsche's early pamphlet-style "*Meditations*" declares the following: "your true nature lies, not concealed deep within you, but immeasurably high above you, or at least above that which you usually take yourself to be."¹⁴³ Here one can already discern a reconceptualization of identity, of the very *being* of the subject, as existing only as an *event* or *trajectory*, and indeed a trajectory of elevation, going higher, or going "over." Just as with the rebirth of Dionysus, Nietzsche properly elaborates his teachings of self-overcoming only in his final years, particularly in what is frequently considered his magnum opus, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (*Zarathustra*).

Zarathustra, published in parts between 1883 and 1885, is a presentation of Nietzsche's tragic philosophy in the poetic unity of a quasi-narrative text centered around the visionary character of Zarathustra. This text's unified vision of the tragic and the teachings of self-overcoming will be the ultimate focus of section 3.4. In preparation for my analysis of *Zarathustra* I will first examine some of the central ideas of Nietzsche's tragic period, which Russel rightly suggests are "irreducibly linked in a conceptual economy within which there is no possibility of discussing one in the absence of the others,"¹⁴⁴ and then show how these ideas are at work in Nietzsche's inauguration of tragic thought in his rewriting of Dionysus in *The Gay Science*. These key concepts, namely the will to power and perspectivism, are integral to understanding *Zarathustra*'s teachings of self-overcoming as a new artifice of identity, value, and truth, one that aims at a truly sinthomatic writing of the Real in the Lacanian sense. To begin with, though, it

¹⁴³ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Schopenhauer as Educator," in *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 129.

¹⁴⁴ Russel, 7.

is crucial to frame these ideas within a proper understanding of Nietzsche's theory of language and reality.

3.2: Creative agency, sublimation, and Nietzsche's critique of truth

Nietzsche's relationship to philosophy and truth is at once positive and negative; as much as he criticizes the conceptual dogma of the Western tradition, he also seeks to unfold a new positive role for philosophical thought as a transformative domain of creativity. At the centre of this vision is a theory of language, agency, and creativity that concerns the human experience and destiny as such. Creativity, for Nietzsche, is the very core of human existence because creative artifice alone affords desire its mobility, life its flourishing, truth and being their perdurance, and human life its value, agency, and freedom. In the words of Nietzsche's Zarathustra, "Only man placed values in things to preserve himself—he alone created a meaning for things, a human meaning. Therefore he calls himself 'man,' which means: the esteemer. To esteem is to create... without esteeming the nut of existence would be hollow."¹⁴⁵ Zarathustra also says, "To will liberates, for to will is to create: thus I teach."¹⁴⁶ For Nietzsche, freedom and agency themselves are synonymous with a kind of creativity. However, since he considers this species of creativity to be an *achievement*, he does not assume agency or even selfhood to be automatic features of human life. Creative agency and freedom are hard won; accordingly, they are threatened by many obstacles. Perhaps the most pernicious of these obstacles is language itself.

¹⁴⁵ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 171.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 318.

Nietzsche's central problem with the legacy of "metaphysical" thought, which might otherwise be called dogmatic philosophy,¹⁴⁷ is its ancient and intrinsic bias towards oversimplifying subtle phenomenal *events* as reified and static *things*. The most pertinent example of this, discussed in my opening chapter, is the very idea of the "I," the subject, imagined as a substantial and self-identical totality with a freedom of will that is somehow causally discrete or self-contained. Nietzsche is also concerned with situations where such dogmatism has insisted upon clear oppositions or dichotomies where there are more accurately continuums or "differences of degree," "especially the ones that imply a negative value for everything sensitive, temporal or historical, and a positive value for everything intelligible, supra-sensible, eternal," such as the relations between the physiological and the conceptual, instinct and reason, or the unconscious and the conscious.¹⁴⁸ This presents a problem because, for Nietzsche, "Words as signs that express concepts *create* a given form for the phenomena, a form that determines the way things appear to us."¹⁴⁹ To quote a brief aphorism of Nietzsche's, "*Linguistic danger to spiritual freedom. – Every word is a prejudice.*"¹⁵⁰

These reifying tendencies in conceptual thought have on the whole produced, for Nietzsche, two equally dissatisfying models of reality: teleology and mechanistic materialism. Just as strongly as teleological modes of thought imbue the world with a fixed religious logic of essences, goods, and ends, a purely materialistic view of things evacuates the very possibility of value or purpose. In both cases there is no room for

¹⁴⁷ João Constâncio, "Instinct and Language in Nietzsche's Beyond Good and Evil," in *Nietzsche on Instinct and Language*, ed. João Constâncio and Maria João Mayer Branco (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 80.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁵⁰ Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, 323.

creative agency, as teleological views of reality take the value, meaning, and order of things to be eternally fixed, while materialism operates only in terms of cold necessity. As Christa Davis Acampora notes, “One view makes too much of us – nearly divine and divorced from the rest of creation – and the other makes too little... neither allows a role for creativity in the development of organisms and their possible futures.”¹⁵¹ The question, then, is how Nietzsche’s critique of language and truth stands to offer an alternative account of creativity capable of overcoming the dogma of being, identity, and thinghood.

Nietzsche’s theory of perspectivism is a radical epistemological stance that treats truth as an intensely local, relational, and contextual artifice. As I will show, the interplay between this perspectival theory of experience and Nietzsche’s understanding of drives as “wills to power” allows him to articulate new possibilities for the liberation of desire that complement the *sinthome* in numerous ways. Alenka Zupančič generally characterizes Nietzsche’s thought as a kind of anti-philosophy that attempts “to locate the point of inner limit, or inherent possibility, of a given discourse... and to activate this precise point as the potential locus of creation.”¹⁵² Early on in Nietzsche’s thought he arrives at the conclusion that the very discourses of the Enlightenment and scientific inquiry, both stemming from a certain Christian ethic of the goodness of ultimate truth, arrive at an unintended and self-undermining limit. He is convinced by Friedrich Albert Lange’s neo-Kantian analysis of reality that “metaphysical materialism is self-undermining in that *it itself* leads to the conclusion that it can speak only of an apparent

¹⁵¹ Christa Davis Acampora, “Between Mechanism and Teleology: Will to Power and Nietzsche’s Gay ‘Science,’” in *Nietzsche and Science*, ed. Gregory Moore and Thomas H. Brobjer (New York: Routledge, 2016), 173.

¹⁵² Zupančič, 7.

world... by quite properly showing that the mind constructs its world, science limits its own competence to the world of appearances.”¹⁵³ Essentially, Nietzsche accepts the Kantian dictum that cognition and experience are limited to a purely phenomenal world while rejecting the idea of any ultimate noumenal reality behind appearance as a mere metaphysical projection.

The consequence of this stance is that the very surface-world of phenomenal appearance *is* reality, the *only* reality. “The true world—we have abolished. What world has remained? The apparent one perhaps? But no! *With the true world we have also abolished the apparent one.*”¹⁵⁴ Nietzsche’s perspectivism is meant, among other things, to dissolve the very dichotomy between the true and the apparent, the subjective and the objective. In his words, “The reasons for which ‘this’ world has been characterized as ‘apparent’ are the very reasons which indicate its reality; any other kind of reality is absolutely indemonstrable.”¹⁵⁵ The reasons for characterizing the phenomenal world as “apparent” Nietzsche is referring to are precisely those for understanding human cognition as a constructive act, one that supplies identity to the objects of perception. If, as Nietzsche argues, these affective and conceptual processes are the only things that allow a reality of objects to cohere *at all*, this means that the very idea of “objective” knowledge is misguided; there can be no objective reality that is not ultimately a kind of artifice. As Lacan puts it, there *is* no “object as such,” and there are “facts” only by dint of artifice. In Nietzsche’s own words, “There is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective ‘knowing’” because ideas like “pure reason” or “knowledge in itself...”

¹⁵³ Young, 90.

¹⁵⁴ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 486.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 484.

demand that we should think of an eye that is completely unthinkable, an eye turned in no particular direction, in which the active and interpreting forces, through which alone seeing becomes seeing *something*, are supposed to be lacking.”¹⁵⁶ The locus of truth, then, is not a stable reality independent from human subjectivity, but rather something *internal* to it. As Zupančič suggests, “Nietzsche’s bet on appearance is not a bet on appearance *against* truth; it is a bet on truth as inherent to appearance... The object is no longer external to the image or representation (so that the image could be compared to it), but inherent to it: it is the very relation of, say, a painting to itself... representation represents that which is created in the very act of representation.”¹⁵⁷ As such, Nietzsche believes that the interpretive artifice of human experience is fundamentally creative, subjective, and aesthetic in character, but just as much as this view proto-deconstructs illusions of ultimate permanence or objectivity it also suggests that any “approximation of a world of becoming to one of being” consists precisely in the creative artifice of interpretation.

So, what *are* the “active interpreting forces” at play in this perspectival account of reality? Crucially, these forces do not belong to, nor stand at the disposal of, the ego. Since Nietzsche views the egoic sense of self *as itself an interpretation*, the egoic subject cannot be postulated as the force or structure that enacts interpretation. As Russel puts it, interpretation is not to be conceived as the activity of an underlying subject... to figure interpretation in this way is itself an interpretation, one guided by a metaphysical project that opposes the subjective and the objective... Interpretation is not the activity of a

¹⁵⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy of Morals*, in *On The Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 119.

¹⁵⁷ Zupančič, 156.

subject discerning underlying meaning, but the pre-subjective projection of a multiplicity of meanings or possibilities that constitute the world's phenomenal surface.¹⁵⁸

Perspectivism thereby forbids taking the egoic subject as the agent of interpretation because such subjectivity is merely a perspectival *effect* of an interpretive force (or complex of forces) that precedes it. It is on this point that the ideas of perspectivism and the will to power are inextricably connected.

The theory of “the will to power” represents Nietzsche’s attempt to arrive at a maximally economical conception of the psyche, as it describes human psychology in terms of a single mechanism: within what is ordinarily treated as a substantial totality, the “self,” there exists a multiplicity of structures engaged in constantly shifting struggles for power. Contrary to the traditional conception of the egoic self as the agent of thought and action, there exists beneath each fiction of identity, as Nietzsche’s notebooks suggest, “the mutual struggle of that which becomes, often with the absorption of one’s opponent; the number of becoming elements not constant.”¹⁵⁹ This multiplicity of competing forces is related to the psychoanalytic theory of “drives,” a term often deployed by Nietzsche,¹⁶⁰ insofar as each of these forces gives rise to a kind of end or goal and vies for expression. Simply put, the will to power is the character of struggle in the event of human life, drives are the centres of force in this struggle, and interpretation or perspective is the emergent result of this competition of drives.¹⁶¹ As Patrick Wotling argues, “the language of the drives is fundamentally fixation of superior and inferior functions within the body,

¹⁵⁸ Russel, 5-6.

¹⁵⁹ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 311.

¹⁶⁰ For Nietzsche, though, the idea of a drive is not limited to such archetypal structures as the pleasure principle or the death drive, as it is possible for a drive to have a much more specific and idiosyncratic character.

¹⁶¹ Russel, 7-8.

within a living organism... an infra-conscious language, i.e. a language which does not translate into words... but ultimately renders them possible.”¹⁶²

The notions of drive and the will to power are relevant to the perspectival account of creative artifice because Nietzsche believes that, for most people, the drives and the perspectives they give rise to are most often in a state of utter anarchy. One finds in this aspect of Nietzsche’s thought the parallel of an inconsistent Other, the population of the conscious and unconscious mind with inherited and contradictory goals and desires that tear the psyche in different directions. For any robust species of creativity or agency to emerge from this state of confusion there must be a radical reorganization of the psyche around an ascendant central drive and desire; agency and creativity must be achieved through a mechanism of sublimation.

Nietzsche’s understanding of drives and sublimation significantly anticipates key aspects of psychoanalytic theory; some even argue that it surpasses the clarity of such psychoanalytic conceptions.¹⁶³ The key problem of any theory of sublimation is how to differentiate between a desirable process of sublimation on the one hand and a pathological symptom formation on the other, since both involve the channeling of a drive or desire through some kind of transformative expression. As I demonstrated in my previous chapter, Lacan’s theory of the *sinthome* embraces the symptom as a potentially liberating engine of desire so long as it is rewritten as something that makes life *livable*, transfigured into a locus of creativity and agency. Sublimation plays a remarkably

¹⁶² Patrick Wotling, “What Language Do Drives Speak?” in *Nietzsche on Instinct and Language*, ed. João Constâncio and Maria João Mayer Branco (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 77.

¹⁶³ Ken Gemes argues that psychoanalysis has long been fraught with a nagging inability to adequately distinguish sublimation from symptom formation, particularly because theorists have often built their definitions of the former around the non-psychoanalytic criterion of achieving socially valued ends. As I will show, he believes that Nietzsche’s view of sublimation offers a solution to this problem. Ken Gemes, “Freud and Nietzsche on Sublimation,” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, no. 38 (Fall 2009): 38-39 and 46-52.

similar role for Nietzsche, as Ken Gemes argues, in the sense that “sublimations involve integration or unification, while pathological symptoms involve splitting off or disintegration... What is disintegrated is of course the (possibility of a) unified self.”¹⁶⁴ On Nietzsche’s view, one of the characteristic features of modernity is the very disorderliness of the environment of values, perspectives, and goals that one internalizes in the course of socialization. This is both a blessing and a curse in the sense that this cultural chaos harbours great creative potential while also dooming most people to an insurmountable inner struggle:

In times like these, abandonment to one’s instincts is one calamity more. Our instincts contradict, disturb, destroy each other... Rationality in education would require that under iron pressure at least one of these instinct systems be paralyzed to permit another to gain in power, to become strong, to become master. Today the individual still has to be made possible by being pruned: possible here means *whole*.¹⁶⁵

Sublimation, here described in terms of instinct systems,¹⁶⁶ therefore involves the ascendancy of a drive to a position of power from which it can orchestrate and redirect other drives, integrating them in the pursuit of a particular desire. Those who achieve this kind of integration, Gemes contends, “actively collect, intensify, and order some of those disparate forces, and create a new direction for them, thereby... reorienting, to some degree, the whole field of forces in which we all exist.”¹⁶⁷ All of this amounts to an escape from the anarchy of instincts through the order granted by the power of a drive, or

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 48.

¹⁶⁵ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 545-46.

¹⁶⁶ For Nietzsche the term “instinct” denotes an intuitive and habitual mode of judgment or taste issuing from the drives, usually in the sense of an aspect of a person’s character. See Constâncio, 93.

¹⁶⁷ Ken Gemes and Christopher Janaway, “Nietzsche on Free Will, Autonomy and the Sovereign Individual,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes*, vol. 80 (2006): 332.

perhaps a desire, that becomes master over all others and thereby becomes the necessary centre of one's life. This is indeed a recipe for enhancing of the livability of life, but, as Nietzsche says, also a recipe for the very becoming "whole" or "possible" of the individual, the forging of a singular organization and individuality. As Gemes suggests, "having free will [for Nietzsche] is not a matter of being free of necessity, but rather acting from a kind of inner necessity stemming from this centre of gravity [of an ascendant drive]."¹⁶⁸ Just as with Lacan's *sinthome*, there is a positive estimation of necessity at the heart Nietzsche's theory of sublimation.

The issue of necessity in Nietzsche's theory of sublimation is connected to yet another characteristic of the *sinthome*: that of the artificer's (lack of) self-knowledge. Nietzsche says that "[t]o *have* to fight the instincts—that is the formula of decadence: as long as life is *ascending*, happiness equals instinct."¹⁶⁹ "Decadence" here refers to the contemporary anarchy of instincts mentioned above, in the sense of an inconsistent Other that produces neurotic turmoil. As I have shown, Nietzsche insists that the power that overcomes such turmoil cannot be the iron rule of a rational ego, while, crucially, he further insists that this power must be *kept apart from the logic of the ego* at all costs. He claims, "We deny that anything can be done perfectly as long as it is still done consciously,"¹⁷⁰ and even that, "To become what one is, one must not have the faintest notion *what* one is."¹⁷¹ The advent of a creative transfiguration of life around a central

¹⁶⁸ Gemes and Janaway, 332.

¹⁶⁹ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 479.

¹⁷⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 581.

¹⁷¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 254.

engine of desire, for Nietzsche, just as for Lacan, requires that this desire be kept hidden from the ego, kept a secret apart from phallic logic. The above passage continues:

nosce te ipsum [know thyself] would be the recipe for ruin... *misunderstanding* oneself, making oneself smaller, narrower, mediocre, become reason itself... The whole surface of consciousness—consciousness *is* a surface—must be kept clear of all great imperatives... Meanwhile the organizing ‘idea’ that is destined to rule keeps growing deep down... it prepares *single* qualities and fitnesses that will one day prove to be indispensable as means towards a whole.¹⁷²

In this passage one finds quite a clear warning against the temptation to pursue rational self-analysis and the construction of egoic or Imaginary identifications at the expense of unconscious developments of desire, especially identifications with *imperatives*, or, one might say, *demands*, such as the demands of the Other. Separate from such logic, separate from any attempt to pin down one’s essence or direction according to the rationality of the Imaginary under the auspices of the Other, the “*single* qualities and fitnesses” that lead one towards a sense of wholeness grow as a secret and singular artifice.

So, Nietzsche’s perspectivism pertains not only to his critiques of philosophy and language but also to his whole understanding of creativity and freedom, as well as his theories of consciousness and self, because it stands as one aspect of a broader theory of reality that places creative artifice at the centre of existence. Standing on its own, however, such a theoretical explication of Nietzsche’s views remains inevitably abstract and, for that reason, somewhat divorced from the real animus of his thought. The sense of sublimation articulated above is closely aligned with certain aspects of Lacan’s schema

¹⁷² Ibid.

of the *sinthome* but lacks a proper sense of the creation of the new or with the manipulation of the Real as such. To see that Nietzsche's thought does indeed articulate and accomplish such sinthomatic feats one must examine the passionate and literary aspects of his writings to fill his theories in with the colour of their poetic moorings. To begin this task, my next section will examine the tragic character of Nietzsche's thought and his sinthomatic writing of the figure of Dionysus, the tragic icon *par excellence*.

3.3 The spirit of tragedy: Nietzsche's writing of Dionysus

Nietzsche's writings articulate many theoretical and philosophical insights into human existence as an inherently creative event, one of perspectival artifice, but they also communicate a record of his personal experience of these insights and reveal the admixture of joy and pain they brought him; to wit, in Nietzsche's texts one finds certain traces of his *jouissance*. This aspect of his writings is important to consider because, perhaps more than anything besides his eventual madness, it clarifies the stakes of moving beyond the stability of a traditional sense of self and life. Moreover, the more personal and emotionally charged centres of Nietzsche's thought are frequently those where his own creative artifice of truth are most keenly displayed. To this end, an analysis of Nietzsche's relationship to the figure of Dionysus is illustrative, as his treatment of this god crystallizes a breadth of issues, including the failure of religious or metaphysical senses of value and purpose, the utter ephemerality of existence, and the hope for the creation of new values *beyond* nihilism. Moreover, the integration of so many of Nietzsche's concerns and insights into the site of a single name, a name he even

tried in desperation to adopt as his mind began to disintegrate,¹⁷³ indicates the possibility of taking “Dionysus” as a site of a kind of symptomatic writing in Nietzsche’s life. The spirit, the *jouissance*, that blazes in Nietzsche’s writing of this name is the painful joy of tragic affirmation.

In a new preface to *Human, All Too Human* that he writes in 1886, Nietzsche reflects back on the circumstances of his writing of *Truth and Lie*, saying, “I was, so far as my own development was concerned, already deep in the midst of moral skepticism and destructive analysis, *that is to say in the critique and likewise the intensifying of pessimism as understood hitherto.*”¹⁷⁴ What is of interest in this retrospective account is the suggested equivalence between moral skepticism and “destructive” analysis on the one hand, and a critique and intensifying of pessimism on the other. Nietzsche’s philosophical elaboration of the tragic can be defined in precisely such terms – a critique of pessimism that radicalizes and intensifies its object of critique. Just as Zupančič argues that Nietzsche mobilizes the inner limit of the discourse of philosophy as a site of creative generation, Nietzsche precipitates the implosion of nihilistic morality precisely at the limit or breaking point of its pessimism.

For Nietzsche, the two-sided recognition of the reality of change and the impossibility of eternal being *is itself* the essence of the tragic: the flow of becoming, change, and passing away is real, while any sense of being or perdurance belongs only to human artifice. It is the turn towards this difficult view of life with focus and a spirit of

¹⁷³ In January of 1889 Nietzsche began to slip into some form of psychosis and ultimately catatonia from which he never recovered. In the last active days of his life, he signed letters with the names “Dionysus” and “The Crucified.” While the cause of his madness can never be known (it has been attributed physiologically to syphilis or a brain tumor, but a purely psychological cause is plausible: see Young, 559-62) the centrality of the Dionysus / Crucified pairing even in Nietzsche’s hallucinatory states is worthy of note.

¹⁷⁴ Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, 209.

affirmation that marks the dawn of the tragic period of Nietzsche's thought, which begins in 1882 with the publication of *The Gay Science*. In an earlier text, Nietzsche suggests that "tragedies have to do precisely with what is incurable, ineluctable, inescapable in the fate and character of man."¹⁷⁵ What is inescapably tragic about the fate of the human situation is its utter ephemerality; eventual dissolution and loss are guaranteed at every scale of life and history. There is no one "true world," no single higher and permanent order of reality to uncover. Nietzsche's "destructive analysis," as the next section of this chapter will show, eventually leads him to a new joy and a new laughter, but these must be understood as *issuing from* his critique and intensification of pessimism itself, the latter taken as a kind of subjective unknitting that necessarily precedes a more potent artifice to come.

Nietzsche's critique of pessimism closely examines the effects, structures, and psychological motivations of pessimistic interpretations of life. In *GS* he frames this critique by distinguishing between two paradigmatic kinds of sufferers. The first, he says, "suffer from an *impoverishment of life* and seek quiet, stillness, calm seas, redemption from themselves through art and insight, or else intoxication, paroxysm, numbness, madness."¹⁷⁶ This type of sufferer therefore has the character of *turning away* from suffering, as their suffering is not openly livable. Nietzsche names "romanticism" as the kind of pessimism that answers to the suffering that seeks refuge from itself, writing, "All romanticism in art and in knowledge fits the dual needs of [this] type."¹⁷⁷ He goes on to say that the type of sufferer who seeks out the salves of romanticism needs

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 219.

¹⁷⁶ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 234.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

“mainly mildness, peacefulness, goodness in thought and in deed... as well as logic, the conceptual comprehensibility of existence – for logic soothes, gives confidence – in short, a certain warm, fear-repelling narrowness and confinement to optimistic horizons.”¹⁷⁸ As I will elaborate, one could say that this romantic mode of suffering remains firmly wedded to the regulation of Symbolic law, as it seeks sanctioned identifications and excitations as a means to hide from the danger of unmediated *jouissance*.

In dramatic contrast, the second type of sufferer in Nietzsche’s account suffers from “a *superabundance of life*” and seeks “Dionysian art as well as a tragic outlook and insight into life... the Dionysian god and man... can allow himself not only the sight of what is terrible and questionable but also the terrible deed and every luxury of destruction, decomposition, negation; in his case, what is evil, non-sensical, and ugly almost seems acceptable because of an overflow in procreating, fertilizing forces capable of turning every desert into bountiful farmland.”¹⁷⁹ Nietzsche’s alternative to romantic pessimism, his “pessimism of the future,” is therefore a *Dionysian* pessimism defined by its character of turning *towards* life in all of its suffering and ephemerality because it experiences destruction and suffering as part and parcel of generative change.¹⁸⁰ For this reason, one might say that the Dionysian pessimist possesses a defining courage to embrace the dangers of *jouissance* beyond mediation of the Other. In contrast to the pacifying metaphysical illusions required by sufferers who turn away from life, the Dionysian pessimist turns *towards* the problem of ephemerality and embraces the

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 235.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 234-235.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 235.

impossibility of eternal truth and being. In *The Antichrist* Nietzsche comments on the disposition a reader must have to understand his work, and the passage summarizes this tragic relationship to truth well: “One must have become indifferent; one must never ask if the truth is useful or if it may prove our undoing. The predilection of strength for questions for which no one today has the courage; the courage of the *forbidden*; the predestination to the labyrinth.”¹⁸¹ In this sense, then, Nietzsche still characterizes a Dionysian attitude towards life as a pursuit of truth, but in the sense that this pursuit is precisely the unraveling of metaphysical fictions and an indifference towards the dangers of the perspectival labyrinth.

This passage in *GS* is in many ways the inauguration of Nietzsche’s tragic period, marking a re-consecration of Dionysus as the central emblem of tragic wisdom after a decade of near absence from Nietzsche’s writings. Walter Kaufmann offers a useful interpretation of this rebirth of tragedy:

Looking for a pre-Christian, Greek symbol that he might oppose to “the Crucified,” Nietzsche found Dionysus. His “Dionysus” is neither the god of the ancient Dionysian festivals nor the god Nietzsche had played off against Apollo in *The Birth of Tragedy*, although he does, of course, bear some of the features of both. In the later works of Nietzsche, “Dionysus” is no longer the spirit of unrestrained passion, but the symbol of the affirmation of life with all its suffering and terror.¹⁸²

Dionysus functions as a symbol of tragic affirmation because Nietzsche shifts his focus away from the role of Dionysus as the god of wine and intoxication and towards the *myth* of Dionysus: the cycle of Dionysus eternally torn to pieces by the titans and eternally

¹⁸¹ Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, 586.

¹⁸² Kaufmann’s notes in Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 209.

reborn. The issue at stake in this, in Nietzsche's words, is that of "the meaning of suffering: whether a Christian meaning or a tragic meaning."¹⁸³ Nietzsche takes Christianity to be romantic in the sense that it turns away from suffering in its pursuit of the antidote of eternal salvation, and suggests that this interpretation takes the meaning of suffering to be "the path to a holy existence"¹⁸⁴ in an afterlife beyond. As such, "The God on the cross is a curse on life, a signpost to seek redemption from it."¹⁸⁵ Opposed to this, "Dionysus cut to pieces is a *promise* of life: it will be eternally reborn and return again from destruction."¹⁸⁶ In this way, Dionysus is a symbol of becoming that involves destruction and generation in equal measure. Moreover, one can only truly affirm the tragic suffering inherent in reality's cycles of dissolution and generation if "*existence is considered sacred enough* to justify even a tremendous amount of suffering."¹⁸⁷

It is this tension, this collision, between Dionysus's promise and the curse of The Crucified that crystallizes so much of Nietzsche's thought and suggests a kind of writing of the Real in sinthomatic terms. Zupančič suggests that Nietzsche himself is the edge, the border, between Dionysus and The Crucified, a kind of fault-line of the Real between them: "I am two, I am a split, I am the event, Nietzsche keeps repeating—'Dionysus and the Crucified,' *at the same time*, as the edge between the two... Until [Nietzsche], there was Dionysus and there was the Crucified... this is what Nietzsche considers to be his achievement... [that] they emerge as two, as a doubleness, only from within this very break."¹⁸⁸ In Zupančič's reading, Nietzsche's central philosophical innovation is the

¹⁸³ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 543.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Zupančič, 16.

recognition of a transformative kind of consciousness embodied by the image of the noon or midday, one of his most frequent motifs. In Nietzsche's figure of the high noon, where things are "dressed in their own shadows,"¹⁸⁹ Zupančič reads a subjectivity akin to psychoanalytic discourse (which Lacan believes one briefly enters whenever one moves between discourses) but described in terms of a shift between *perspectives*. She writes, "there is a perspective (on things) that emerges only when one shifts perspectives. It does not exist as a separate perspective with its own point of view; yet it is a perspective."¹⁹⁰ This perspective, she argues, centres around "the middle, inner edge of life, the point where life is decided,"¹⁹¹ in the sense that "the Real exists as the internal fracture or split of representation, as its intrinsic edge on account of which representation never fully coincides, not simply with its object, but with itself."¹⁹²

This reading suggests that Nietzsche's supreme creative act is to inscribe himself as a kind of border of noncoincidence between Dionysus and Christ, to bring these two gods together as nearly-mirrored divinities in the throes of death and to inhabit the edge between them as a site where the Real of value is decided. Though Zupančič never once mentions the *sinthome* in her text, the description she offers of Nietzsche as the generative edge between Dionysus and Christ, "the point where they can only just be perceived as two that are distinguished-yet-indistinguishable,"¹⁹³ strikingly articulates an act of sinthomatic suppletion in ways that are perhaps even clearer than Lacan's discussion of Joyce. In Zupančič's words, "Dionysus does not come *after* the Crucified,

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 27.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 113.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 122.

¹⁹² Ibid., 28.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 17.

as something completely different. Dionysus is not simply the equivalent of new, different values; Dionysus is not... the morning of a new epoch after the fall of the old one. Dionysus is the beginning as *midday*, the moment when ‘one turns to two,’ namely, the moment of the very split or ‘becoming two’ *as that which is new.*”¹⁹⁴ This is to say that Dionysus does not come to *replace* The Crucified; Christ is not disavowed, ejected, or repressed. Rather, the very site of “The Crucified” is *suppleted* by the writing of “Dionysus” as its imperfect mirror. Put differently, this suppletion takes place through Nietzsche’s assumption of a subjectivity *between* the suffering of Christ and Dionysus.

Taken in this way, Nietzsche’s relationship to Dionysus communicates his experience of a reality internally fractured by a creative manipulation of the Real and thereby opened to the possibility of new values. It may be too much to go so far as calling Dionysus Nietzsche’s *sinthome*, but at the very least Nietzsche’s Dionysus stands as an example of the “poetry and inventiveness” characteristic of *sinthomatic* writing. The god eternally cut to pieces as “a promise of life,” at once incommensurable with and nearly identical to the god on the cross as a promise of *eternal* life, embodies in a single word and image the very structure of perspectival consciousness. Existence itself, being itself, eternally returns as Dionysus does; he is not nothing, we are not nothing, and yet disintegration and ephemerality belong to the heart of existence; Dionysus is torn to pieces, all artifice is inevitably sundered, and yet an eternal glimmer of generation, regeneration, and perdurance belongs to the artifice of which we are capable. Nietzsche’s youthful despair over the collapse of his Christian faith is redeemed in an artifice that

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 25.

exists as the edge between two names, that simultaneously finds and declares truth to be immanent to its own enunciation.

However, just as Lacan or Harari might speak of an unknotting that precipitates a stronger knotting, for Nietzsche one must always go *under* in order to “go over,” to go higher and to become what one is: “I break of my word: thus my eternal lot wants it; as a proclaimer I perish.”¹⁹⁵ As Zupančič writes, “To perish as a proclaimer, to break at one’s word, is to become the thing one proclaims... This is not to say, however, that in order to become something else, one *first* has to break. The break itself is the ‘something else,’... The something else is the One becoming Two.”¹⁹⁶ Dionysus is the central emblem of Nietzsche’s personal path of going-under and going-over, but to understand the *teaching* Dionysus represents, that he is a signifier by which something of the virus of the *sinthome* is transmitted, one must understand the more general sense of self-overcoming he represents. For this, I will now turn to Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*.

3.4: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: The tragic art of self-overcoming

Thus Spoke Zarathustra, by far the most literary of Nietzsche’s works, communicates the central insights of Nietzsche’s tragic period in a unified poetic vision and, accordingly, offers many insights into how Nietzsche’s thought can be taken as a *whole*. Of particular interest to any attempt to read Nietzsche in sinthomatic terms is the great number of passages in *Zarathustra* concerning the idea of self-overcoming, phrased in terms of *Untergang*, “going under,” and *Übergang*, “going over.” This pair of phrases describes, for Nietzsche, a kind of tragic cycle of the creative spirit as necessarily passing through

¹⁹⁵ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 333.

¹⁹⁶ Zupančič, 16.

states of depletion, disintegration, or sundering on the way towards new heights of health and integration. This account of the creative development of the individual, then, has at its heart the wisdom of the tragic spirit of Dionysus turned inwards: even within a single human life one can be cut to pieces and reborn, and if a life is to be lived creatively then this process is absolutely necessary. In addition to capturing the spirit of Dionysus, the description of self-overcoming in *Zarathustra* also incorporates the image of the high noon, as the sun needs to go under – under the sea, under the earth – in order to go over and once again reach the height of noon, the moment of shortest shadow. This creative process of disintegration and reintegration, as I will show, corresponds remarkably to a process of sinthomatic unknotting and reknitting in its insistence upon the overcoming of inherited values and identifications in favour of the birth of the new. In this section, then, I will examine Nietzsche's presentation of self-overcoming in *Zarathustra* as a *teaching* in order to show that his thought is sinthomatic not only at the levels of theory and his personal creative acts, but also in terms of what he attempts to make possible for others.

The very first aphorism in the main text of *Zarathustra*, entitled “On the Three Metamorphoses,” is a microcosm of the entire work's account of creative self-overcoming. *Zarathustra* says, “Of three metamorphoses of the spirit I tell you: how the spirit becomes a camel; and the camel, a lion; and the lion, finally, a child.”¹⁹⁷ These three stages of creative development describe the internalization of values (the beast of burden accepting the weight of its cargo), the courageous refusal of this burden (the lion's “no”), and finally the dawn of a new innocence and creativity (the child's “yes”).

¹⁹⁷ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 137.

Nietzsche's poetic description of these stages communicates, as I will show, a trajectory of sinthomatic sublimation.

In the first stage of the creative spirit, Nietzsche describes the camel as “the strong reverent spirit that would bear much.”¹⁹⁸ This image suggests the acceptance and internalization of values and morals, both passive and active, that accompany the early stages of life. There are clear parallels here to the inauguration of subjectivity and acceptance of the burdensome demands of the Other as the necessary first stage of a creative life. Following this logic, “the spirit becomes a lion who would conquer his freedom and be master in his own desert... for ultimate victory he wants to fight with the great dragon... ‘Thou shalt.’”¹⁹⁹ The great dragon “Thou shalt” represents the fundamental obstacle of creativity: the self-evident and totalizing completeness of value in a given reality principle. The dragon speaks, and says, “All value has long been created, and I am all created value. Verily, there shall be no more ‘I will.’”²⁰⁰ Crucially, the image of the lion represents an act of heresy, a “no,” a declaration of “anything, but not *that*” directed towards the tyranny of values that declare themselves to be invulnerably final.

In another work, Nietzsche offers a parallel description of such awakening of a creative spirit, writing, “a will and desire awakens to go off, anywhere, at any cost... ‘Better to die than to go on living *here*.’”²⁰¹ Issuing from this act of heresy is “the creation of freedom for oneself for new creation... To assume the right to new values—

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 138.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 139.

²⁰¹ Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, 7.

that is the most terrifying assumption for a reverent spirit that would bear much.”²⁰² Here there is a sense of the danger and the horror of stepping beyond the defined boundaries of value and the regulation of experience they afford, but also the promise of liberation contained in this first step beyond the regulated and familiar. Finally, though, even this heretical resistance must be overcome and developed into a creative subjectivity that leaves this drama behind: “Why must the preying lion still become a child? The child is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a self-propelled wheel, a first movement, a sacred ‘Yes.’ For the game of creation... a sacred ‘Yes’ is needed: the spirit now wills his own will.”²⁰³

These metamorphoses of the spirit describe a path of self-overcoming at the timescale of a whole human life, but this description is counterbalanced in *Zarathustra* by others that much more strongly suggest creative self-transformation to occur as a perpetual cycle of sundering and transfiguration, unknotting and reknitting. This aspect of self-overcoming is centrally important to Nietzsche’s account because it is only in the sense of a joyous affirmation of the glimmer of being in the ephemeral, the perpetual transfiguration of experience through the unknotting and reknitting of identity and being, that self-overcoming can be properly understood as a tragic or Dionysian teaching.

Nietzsche writes,

Creation—that is the great redemption from suffering, and life’s growing light. But that the creator may be, suffering is needed and much change. Indeed, there must be much bitter dying in your life, you creators... through a hundred souls I have already passed on

²⁰² Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 139.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

my way, and through a hundred cradles and birth pangs. Many a farewell I have taken...
this very destiny—my will wills.²⁰⁴

In passages such as this, Nietzsche emphasizes that the very destiny of a creative life – a life that turns towards the perspectival and towards experiencing itself *as* tragic artifice, as the *lived event* of the creative artifice of truth – is to experience oneself not as overcome, but as *overcoming*, as creative travail without finality. As Zarathustra says, “You will be a heretic to yourself... You must wish to consume yourself in your own flame: how could you wish to become new unless you had first become ashes!”²⁰⁵ Such a perpetual character of self-overcoming betrays a *jouissance* that exists only *beyond* identity, beyond the maintenance of desire around a cherished set of ideal identifications, and points instead towards the tragic affirmation of desire *as* mobile, transformative, and creative.

The character of self-overcoming as an iterative and tragic process is crucial to understanding two of its most infamous and misunderstood expressions: the *Übermensch* and the doctrine of the eternal return. To begin with, one must recall that Nietzsche’s conception of the *Übermensch* or “overman” is an ideal that aims to capture the spirit of tragic creativity as something that points beyond the scope of an individual human life; it suggests that the artifice of creativity is not merely a means of personal escape from a tyrannical reality but also the means by which societies and civilizations might overcome themselves. This aspect of Nietzsche’s thought reaches towards a futural range and orientation of creativity that is perhaps wanting in Lacan’s account, and it is presented with unequivocal importance: “God died: now *we* want the overman to live... I have the

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 199.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 176.

overman at heart, *that* is my first and only concern—and *not* man: not the neighbour, not the poorest, not the most ailing, not the best... what I love in man is that he is an overture and a going under... That you despise... that lets me hope... That you have despaired, in that there is much to revere. For you did not learn how to surrender.”²⁰⁶ The term *Übermensch* in its most literal translation might be rendered as “overhuman,” in the sense that it represents the goal of surpassing the interpretations and identifications of what has hitherto been considered the human as such. At the beginning of the text, Zarathustra declares that “[m]an is something that shall be overcome,” that “[m]an is a rope, tied between beast and overman—a rope over an abyss. A dangerous across, a dangerous on-the-way...”²⁰⁷ This suggests that the task of self-overcoming as the affirmation of the tragic and the perspectival should not come to a kind of solipsistic end with each creative individual, but be borne forwards as a *collective* transfiguration of reality. Taken in this way, the overman represents the projection of an apotheosis of tragic affirmation to come that would give birth to a tragic *culture*. As Kaufmann puts it, “The man... who has organized the chaos of his passions and integrated every feature of his character, redeeming even the ugly by giving it meaning in a beautiful totality—this *Übermensch* would also realize how inextricably his own being was involved in the totality of the cosmos: and in affirming his own being, he would also affirm all that is, has been, or will be.”²⁰⁸ In order to understand the psychology that the overman represents as an ideal, one must understand the defining thought that such an overhuman would be capable of thinking: the eternal return.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 399.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 126.

²⁰⁸ Kaufmann, 320.

The doctrine of the eternal return of the same, by Nietzsche's own estimation, is the very centrepiece of his thought. He describes his return to tragic thought in the following manner: "herewith I again touch the point from which I once went forth: *The Birth of Tragedy* was my first revaluation of all values. Herewith I again stand on the soil out of which my intention, my *ability* grows—I, the last disciple of the philosopher Dionysus—I, the teacher of the eternal recurrence."²⁰⁹ This idea is so central to Nietzsche's writings because, as a creative myth, it most clearly communicates the sense of *being* he seeks within a world of flux and becoming. To return to the leading phrase of the introduction to this chapter, Nietzsche's full formulation is: "That *everything recurs* is the closest *approximation of a world of becoming to a world of being*:—high point of the meditation."²¹⁰ The height of a sense of being, then, is to be sought in a thinking of *recurrence*: how can this be understood?

The thought of the eternal return of the same is not, as it is sometimes mistaken to be, a physical or metaphysical theory that the history of the universe and the earth within it infinitely repeats an identical cycle of events. It is instead the mythopoetic communication of an ideal subjectivity that has perfectly overcome any attachment to the old metaphysics of being, and thereby left behind all misgivings and vengefulness towards life itself. In a central passage Nietzsche writes, "To redeem those who lived in the past and to recreate all 'it was' into a 'thus I willed it'—that alone should I call redemption... but what is it that puts even the liberator himself in fetters? 'It was'—that is the name of the will's gnashing of teeth and most secret melancholy. Powerless

²⁰⁹ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 563.

²¹⁰ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 330.

against what has been done, he is an angry spectator of all that is past.”²¹¹ In this sense, the final obstacle of creativity is the very problem of affirming ephemeral temporality itself; the fundamental symptom of life, for Nietzsche, is the very knowledge of the necessary passing away of so much good in the past and, moreover, the necessity of everything terrible in the past as the precedent of anything good in the present or future. The near impossibility of accepting, on the one hand, the fundamental transience of the beautiful, and on the other the history of suffering as the necessary path that led towards the present, is what Nietzsche takes to have been the original motivation of metaphysical thought as a kind of compensatory *revenge* against time and ephemerality: “This, indeed this alone, is what *revenge* is: the will’s ill will against time and its ‘it was’... ‘Everything passes away; therefore everything deserves to pass away. And this too is justice, this law of time that it must devour its children.’ Thus preached madness.”²¹² Just as Lacan asserts that the fundamental symptomatology of life issues from each individual’s feeling they have been unjustly severed from a proper sense of being, Nietzsche suggests that the human impetus towards self-torture and destruction arises from an inability to reckon with the tragic character of existence itself.

To overcome this sense of reality as a *symptom*, Nietzsche believes that humanity must strive for a radical and creative affirmation of existence as a *whole*, reaching back into the abyss of suffering and accepting that any sense of being in the present or future can exist only as artifice. This ideal of radical affirmation, almost certainly unattainable in its perfected form, is what is contained in the thought of the eternal return as a creative appropriation of the past, a redemptive act of artifice that perfectly embraces the tragic

²¹¹ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 251.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 252.

character of artifice itself. As a mentor of mine quite eloquently puts it, “The will is delivered from vengefulness when it wills the eternal return of the same, i.e., when it wills time and becoming as being rather than nothing, a choice and decision it can make because being is no longer thought as the timeless permanence of presence. The will becomes free when it can choose time’s passing, when it can will itself in its own transience and finitude.”²¹³ This leaves the final question as to why Nietzsche phrases this affirmation as an eternal *return*, which is perhaps answered best by a figure who stands between Nietzsche and Lacan both historically and philosophically, Martin Heidegger: “What does the ‘yes’ affirm? Precisely what the ill will of a vengeful spirit renounced: time, transiency... how can passing away perdure? Only in this way: as passing away it must not only continuously go, but must also always come. Only in this way: passing away and transience must recur in their coming as the same.”²¹⁴ The thought of the eternal return, taken in this way, is a mythic expression of hope for an apotheosis of creative affirmation directed towards the past that says to all that is “fragment,” “riddle,” and “dreadful accident,” “But thus I will it; thus I shall will it.”²¹⁵ As such, it represents an ideal of health and convalescence, an ideal of overcoming of the all-too-human spirit of revenge that disparages the ephemeral, denies creative artifice, and seeks redemption in a religious logic of otherworldly and eternal being. This is Zarathustra’s greatest wish, and Nietzsche’s central teaching: “For *that man be delivered from revenge*, that for me is the bridge to the highest hope, and a rainbow after long

²¹³ Robert Nicholls, “The Child’s New Time (Heidegger’s Nietzsche: Time Beyond Revenge),” in *Zarathustra’s Joyful Annunciations of...*, ed. David Goicoechea and Marko Zlomislac (Thought House Publishing Group, 1995), 38.

²¹⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche, Volume II: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, in *Nietzsche, Volumes One and Two*, trans. David Farrell Krell (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 226.

²¹⁵ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 253.

storms.”²¹⁶ For Nietzsche, then, the fundamental symptom of life is contempt for transience itself; the vengeful disparaging of becoming and change is a fault within subjectivity that can only be stopped through the creative transfiguration of the possible and the approximation of being through an affirmative artifice of becoming.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 221.

Conclusion

The idea of the *sinthome* functions as an ideal framework for understanding the mutually reinforcing insights of Lacan and Nietzsche's analyses of linguistic subjectivity. The clarity that the *sinthome* offers to the project of bringing Nietzsche and Lacan together stems from its emphasis on art and creativity as the central concerns of Lacan's thought. By tracing the origins of this emphasis on artifice in Lacan's final teachings, it becomes clear that even his earlier theories are deeply concerned with creatively overcoming the symptomatic and religious logic of truth. Lacan's broadest aim, on his own account, is to exorcise God from language by freeing subjectivity for its creative participation in the structure of truth itself. With the *sinthome*, Lacan concludes his teachings with the articulation of a creative practice of subjectivity that comes to construct *itself* as a work of art through a perpetual practice of unknotting and reknitting.

When one approaches Nietzsche with this reading of Lacan in hand the similarities between their views announce themselves dramatically, as Nietzsche's thought is centrally and unambiguously concerned with disclosing the aesthetic character of reality and cultivating a new creative consciousness capable of overcoming the spectre of religious metaphysics. The task Nietzsche sets himself as the teacher of the eternal return and the last disciple of Dionysus is to rewrite the fundamental symptom of transience as the site of a redemptive transfiguration of existence; he seeks to affirm the tragic impossibility of permanence through an artifice that knows itself to offer only an approximation of being, but that nonetheless allows one to escape the gravity of Plato's collapsed sun of the Good and make life *livable*. Nietzsche's tragic artifice of self-overcoming, insofar as it transfigures the symptom of transience into an affirmative

engine of new desires and values, is strikingly *sinthomatic*. Indeed, one could just as easily invert this formulation and pursue a reading of the *sinthome* as an inherently tragic wisdom of creativity, as these two teachings are fundamentally united in their attempt to replace the corpse of religion with a new art of subjectivity.

This attempt to overcome the spectre of religion raises a final problem that implicates Nietzsche and Lacan equally. Since God, dead or alive, functions as the ordering force of reality, a force that is dissimulative, symptomatic, and tyrannical but *functions* nonetheless, Nietzsche's and Lacan's attempts to exorcise or overcome this order of truth inevitably raise the question of how a true proliferation of *sinthomatic* or Dionysian consciousness would affect collective reality. Lorenzo Chiesa formulates this concern in the Lacanian context: "how do *sinthomes* communicate with each other if there is no common phantasmatic background... Is it not the case that a hypothetical society of fully *sinthomatic* beings of language... would inevitably cause a fragmentation of the Symbolic into many Symbolics, and ultimately its complete demise?"²¹⁷ The problem Chiesa identifies, taken more broadly, is whether the therapeutic benefits of such an artifice of truth, tragic or *sinthomatic*, ultimately outweigh the threat such an artifice poses to the preservation of the Symbolic as the effective ground of common reality and communication. Hence, this question deserves to be addressed from Lacanian and Nietzschean perspectives alike.

Nietzsche has an obvious but perhaps disheartening response to this problem: with the dawn of nihilism, the highest values *devalue themselves*, particularly in the sense that the Christian faith in the goodness of truth leads inevitably to the unraveling of

²¹⁷ Lorenzo Chiesa, *Subjectivity and Otherness: A Philosophical Reading of Lacan*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007), 190-91.

truth itself. For Nietzsche, then, the problem is that the horizon of universal order has already been wiped away and *cannot* be reconstituted as it was; *life is tragic*. From another perspective, however, one might say that Nietzsche's idea of the overman and his interest in cultivating long-term projects of culture ostensibly suggest the possibility of something like a new or refashioned Symbolic oriented around a tragic reality principle. The problem, though, is that such transformations of culture take generations to accomplish, while the current order of things is one of unlivable nihilism. On this point, the urgency of cultivating livable forms of subjectivity seems to take precedence over questions concerning any ideal of collective communication.

On the Lacanian side of this question, the analyst Patricia Gherovici offers a more concrete example of such urgency through her *sinthomatic* interpretation of transgender experience, which she bases on her clinical experience with trans analysands. She writes, "To cross the frontier between the sexes is often lived as traversing a mortal threshold, a passage from an impending doom towards a renaissance... it is often a matter of life and death."²¹⁸ If a radically creative artifice of truth is capable of granting livability and creative agency to genuinely imperiled subjects, trans or otherwise, then it would seem that the overall effects of such artifice on the maintenance of a dependably common Symbolic could be, at best, of only secondary importance, if such a Symbolic is indeed possible at all.²¹⁹ Gherovici embraces the *sinthome* as "an invention that allows someone to live by providing an organization of *jouissance*," and suggests that the curative

²¹⁸ Patricia Gherovici, *Transgender Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 165.

²¹⁹ A worthwhile consideration is whether Lacan's rejection of the collective unconscious in *Seminar XXIII* suggests he has *always* conceived of the Symbolic as fragmentary in Chiesa's sense. If it were clear that the *sinthome* might *bring about* an unprecedented fragmentation of reality then I would share Chiesa's concerns; however, it seems to me that the *sinthome* instead responds to the Symbolic's already fragmentary character (perhaps by cancelling one's subscription to the very fantasy that some Other of the Other exists who might allow a non-fragmentary Symbolic to cohere).

function of sinthomatic writing, though it is “more poignantly observed in the chronicles of people who changed sex,” is applicable to the lives of all.²²⁰ While it is obviously true that some people experience desire as a much more acute crisis than others, such crises are rooted in the fundamental problems of language and desire as such.

To conclude, by taking Nietzsche and Lacan together one is able to appreciate the *sinthome* of tragic wisdom, or the tragic wisdom of the *sinthome*, “as you like,” as Lacan might say. By taking the *sinthome* as the leading theme, as I have, such an encounter illuminates the creative artifice of desire in Nietzsche’s thought as a writing of the Real of tragedy that puts a stop to the symptom of God. At the same time, a sinthomatic reading of Nietzsche enriches one’s understanding of Lacan, as it shines a light back onto the problem of being at the heart of Lacan’s thought with all of Nietzsche’s force and urgency. Taken together, the tragic and the *sinthome* emphasize above all else the aesthetic character of a life lived in language, and the creativity of desire as the only artifice capable of imbuing such a life with a livable sense of being.

²²⁰ Ibid., 142; *ibid.*, 139.

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