

Book Review

Review of *Esoteric Lacan* by Philipp Valentini and Mahdi Tourage (Eds.). London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2020. 254 pages. ISBN 978-1786609700.

Reviewed by S. Alfonso Williams*
Independent Researcher

When first coming across the Philipp Valentini and Mahdi Tourage's cover of *Esoteric Lacan* on a website listing of forthcoming psychoanalytic books, I was intrigued by the title. My knowledge of Lacan was only slightly beyond the fresh stage. Two factors make studying the work of Lacan difficult. Firstly, Lacan himself deliberately chose not to make his language, concepts, and teaching style overly comprehensible. This is in contradistinction to Freud, whose language is relatively clear and straightforward. Secondly, Lacan's methodology of unfolding his creative ideas and concepts over time is fundamentally different from those methods of science. Science deals with the macro- and microcellular, subatomic and universal forces whose natures are predictable to a degree, and the scientific method, a specific protocol facilitating producing discrete results. Lacan, in contrast, mused, proposed, experimented, and interlocuted with multiple disciplines, such as topology, structural anthropology, and philosophy, in an idiosyncratic way to generate a unique and provocative perspective all his own.

This constitutes the fundamental difference between the sciences and non-sciences such as psychoanalysis and philosophy. Generally, the sciences discuss and interpolate their objects through common languages and procedures, from which novelty is insularly developed and comprehensible from a common starting point. In psychoanalysis and philosophy however, novelty is often specific to the individual's approach. While arguably, it might have been possible to produce another Einstein using scientific logics and materials to generate common results via consensus, producing another Lacan would be next to impossible on the basis that when, why, and how Lacan chose to combine his interests exclusively depends on his singular character, epistemology, logics, and procedures. Add to this Lacan was always shifting his position, the only way to get a Lacanian answer was to wait for Lacan himself to produce it.

The importance of stating this fundamental difference directly relates to what it means to generate a secondary literature hermeneutics from a principally creative process. It is not possible to absolutely root out Lacan's intentions without him explicitly elucidating so. More simply stated, no one can elaborate another person's thought process before, during, or after they state it, much less in a half-stated manner. Precognition of this kind would constitute all sorts of Lacanian violations culminating in a truth that is "half-stated". Viewing Lacan's work initializing from an artistic generative process branching toward scientific deductivity has been important for me in understanding his transdisciplinary capabilities.

What can be performed, however, is to take the connections he derived and implied and make further inferences, connections, and reflections through outside perspectives. The present collection of exquisite essays in *Esoteric Lacan* compiled by Philipp Valentini and Mahdi

* Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to S. Alfonso Williams.
Email: sawinterlocutor@gmail.com
Language and Psychoanalysis, 2022, 11 (1), 59-63. 59
<http://dx.doi.org/10.7565/landp.v11i1.6534>

Tourage is hands down one of the most provocative, but also clarifyingly prescient, books I have ever read on Lacan's work.

With Lacan's transdisciplinary and transversal approach to psychoanalysis stressed, it becomes easier to appreciate how this iterative approach is progressively fruitful in the present collection of essays. The directive of the essay set is made explicitly clear on the back cover blurb:

This collection critically examines how Lacan helps us to question how far the European understanding of these texts and traditions is tied to the universal drive of capitalism and to the psychological internalization of the history of colonialism. (back blurb)

Agata Bielik-Robson opens the first chapter with a discussion of the relationship between Lacan and his usage of Judaism. Given what I'm already familiar with, Bielik-Robson immediately struck me saying:

For Lacan, Judaism is the paradigmatic religion of the Other, arranged around the unspeakable extimate centre: the encounter with the Thing itself... (p. 24)

My personal background is with Christianity, not Judaism, but this statement alone was enough of a bridge to allow a scholastic connection to be made. More interestingly, the paragraph before Jesus is related to Lacan's *sinthome* concept whereby "...Jesus, the first *sinthome*, or the first saint man destituted/reduced to his symptom, who successfully expressed his hatred for being with the love for the Real" (p. 24).

The second chapter helmed by Calvin Warren asks a direct question: How might anti-black violence become a sort of religious rituals or a perverse form of worship? (p. 47). Towards the closing of his essay, the author posits:

Hope in miracles, overcoming the American idol, and the reinstatement of the true Other might not have definitive places in Lacanian psychoanalysis, but a continued conversation between black theology and psychoanalysis is fecund with possibility. (p. 56)

I can personally attest as a black subject that there is next to no relation between these two domains in contemporary black United States culture. The church supplements all parallel functions, as the vast majority of black subjects are religious and predominantly Christian. To strike up such a discourse requires a Herculean effort to juxtapose psychoanalysis against the omnipotence of God.

Mahdi Tourage gives an excellent overview of the parallels and differences between Lacanian theory and Sufism. I was pleasantly surprised to see Tourage note "...Lacan's formulation of language as the single paradigm of all structures brings him close to Sufis and makes his work 'esoteric'" (p. 63). Enlightenment continued when he went on to say:

Whereas Muslim theologians employed hair-splitting rational debate as a mode of discourse to speak of God, Sufis paradoxically spoke of 'the language of unsaying' in reference to the awesome God who is irreducible to any language. (p. 63)

There are explicit ties here to apophatic and cataphatic theology, describing God through negative affirmation, and positive affirmation, respectively. Lacanians are already familiar with Lacan's elusive discourse around the Real. Others will find Tourage's further discussions of the phallus, Qur'anic poetry, and Rumi's *Masnawi* intensely engaging.

Many will appreciate Bruce Rosenstock's discussion of Kabbalistic use between Lacan and Wilfred Bion. Taking two of psychoanalysis' most complex thinkers and uniting them through religious themes commands respect. Rosenstock notes the following consequence of his thesis:

...I will suggest that Lacan and Bion seek to free us from the categories of breaking and repairing (part and whole objects) and let desire rejoice in the sheer facticity of being in its rupture... (p. 78)

Rarely do I see conversations with these two figures uttered in the same breath. It was a treat and exciting to learn more about Bion since my knowledge of him is next to nil.

Those familiar with Lacan's Four Discourses eventually come to learn about the fifth Capitalist Discourse but may not fully understand it. John Holland provides a thorough and succinct remedy to this. Its chief distinction is motion conducted like an infinity-symbol instead of directly clockwise or counter-clockwise. In addition, Holland takes special care to clarify Lacan's discursive intentions relative to Marx:

To argue, therefore, that Marx makes Lacan's writing of the capitalist discourse possible will require an attentive and meticulous *misreading* of Marx's critique; it will proceed on the assumption that the psyche itself misunderstands Marx. (p. 114)

Miroslav Griško highlights a very important question common to many struggles: "...How can Rebel oppose Master without becoming a new Master? (p. 119). Even outside of Lacanian theory, the frustration encountered throughout history with factions claiming to be different from their predecessors, only to engage in the same behaviors is an extremely worn sociopolitical trope. Griško examines this relationship utilizing Christian Jambet and Guy Lardreau's *The Angel*, Carl Schmitt's political theology, Lacan's "not-all" formulation, and much more.

In Jared Sexton and Sora Han's own words:

This chapter addresses the modern problematic of racial slavery and universal freedom and the possibility of a theoretical formulation of relations between the two terms. (p. 141)

Sexton and Han introduce an Afropessimist perspective into *Esoteric Lacan's* schema. They use the Lacan's *vel* (Latin: "or") concept to extemporize on the nature of choice, forced choice, and the effects incurred on the black subject contending with historical slavery and freedom in the multiple senses of being and existence.

Janina Maris Hofer tackles two of Lacan's most difficult concepts, that of the Borromean Knot and sinthome. Like Holland's essay *The Capitalist Exception*, Hofer's *Experiences of Transcendence in the Borromean Knot* is a compact beginner's guide to the concept and how it can be integrated with transcendence as discussed by Thomas Luckmann. Hofer directly states:

The ultimate aim of this chapter is to show to what extent Luckmann's concept of experiences of transcendence can be combined with Lacan's Sinthome, providing a way to describe 'religious' experiences. (p. 163)

Davor Džalto treads familiar ground in juxtaposing Lacan's multi-thematic use of the father with Orthodox Christianity's Trinitarian complexes and implementations. His essay *Freedom and Nothingness, Between Theodicy and Anthropodicy: Lacan and (Un)Orthodox Perspectives* (with the '...and Nothingness' alluding to Sartre perhaps?) helps to give Lacanian concepts

like “The Big Other” and the “Name-of-the-Father” more contextual flesh, so to speak. He writes:

Thus the fantasy of god (the universal father) mediates all sorts of unconscious phenomena, including the Oedipus complex, sadomasochistic impulses. In this sense, both of these father figures (the ‘real’ [family] father and the ‘Divine Father’) belong to the *symbolic* order, they are established as part of our immersion into the (symbolic, social) ‘world’. The ‘Big Other’ speaks through both of these paternal figures. (p. 184-5)

My awareness of Benny Lévy is limited to his relationship with Jean-Paul Sartre and the work they produced together. Surprisingly, I was unaware Lévy was also Sartre’s official secretary for that brief time period. Nonetheless, I shouldn’t be surprised with his concentrated Lacanian engagement. Gilles Hanus brings both figures together under the discussion of antiphilosophy, which Hanus puts forward saying:

For Lévy and Lacan, antiphilosophy never involves renouncing rationality, but is rather an attempt to free oneself from the conceptual reduction of the real produced by the discourse that is specifically philosophical: the *logos*. (p. 201)

Ibn ‘Arabī is another philosophical figure I have limited experience with. To that extent Philipp Valentini made me acutely aware of the fact that “...historians of Sufism tend to read Ibn ‘Arabī only through a Neoplatonist framework...” but also that he had “...been introduced in the West first through Renaissance epistemologies and later, in the twentieth century, through late occultist epistemologies...” which involved “...Hermeticism, Christian Kabbalah, and Martinist Free-Masonry...” (p. 215). Valentini goes on to extract a complex argument touching on the concepts of ‘adam, wujūd, ijād, the Name-of-the-Father, the Law, mysticism’s role in the emptiness of being, among numerous others.

I in no way, shape, or form consider my exposure to Lacan parallel with a Lacanian scholar’s. However, even with my limited exposure, I have found this book extremely enlightening and helpful in understanding fundamental Lacanian concepts beyond their usual Eurocentric function. My long introduction about Lacan and Lacanian ideas interlocuting with other domains comes full circle through the publishing of *Esoteric Lacan*. *Esoteric Lacan* is the work demonstrating the true efficacy and pitfalls of the ideas of a monumental figure who carved out a path for himself in a revolutionary, but conservative, space, compared to his peers. Yet, even through Lacan’s journey and exploration of heretical ideas, he does not exist in a world all his own and must eventually content with the annals of world history and peripheral thinkers.

Esoteric Lacan does a fantastic job of balancing Lacanian concepts and religious world views, on top of covering wide territorial engagement. It is comprehensive enough to be listed with other introductory books on Lacan, and exploratory enough to be a first choice for those seeking non-mainstream religious studies work. Anytime a work focused on a large breadth of content, there is the danger of lack of focus. *Esoteric Lacan* does *not* suffer that fate. The careful reader will notice the thoughtful, interlocuting threads that weave the golden, novel ideas within this edited collection. Further appreciation, maybe more so for English-language readers, will ensue when attempting to seek out similar materials, only to find they are far and few in-between. Lacan proved repeatedly the positive generativity in interlocutive methodology. *Esoteric Lacan* is a continuation of that tradition.

I cannot express my personal gratitude enough to Philipp Valentini, Mahdi Tourage, and the assemblage of authors for their incredible work in *Esoteric Lacan*. Interdisciplinary-minded

thinkers, scholars, and interlocutors should consider this work an active meditation on where Lacanian/religious studies scholarship *can* be and go when moving beyond a predominant framework. Too many fall into the idea of what Lacan represents instead of where he can *grow*. Without the capacity for growth, Lacanian studies, and eventually latent representation of the man himself, will grow staler than mouldy bread – and no amount of mana can save that descent from ‘on high’.