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Interstices of the Sublime

*Theology and Psychoanalytic
Theory*

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Introduction

The Primal Scene of Christianity

In this book I conduct an investigation of important religious, theological, and psychoanalytic concepts, primarily through a reading of sublimation. Sublimation is a privileged term that is closely connected with the notion of the sublime, a Kantian term that also has psychoanalytic and theological connotations. Investigating sublimation and the sublime as important terms for theological discourse brings together psychoanalytic theory from Freud to Lacan, Kristeva, and Žižek along with more conventional philosophical discourses, including contemporary continental philosophy. To orient ourselves toward considering the significance of psychoanalysis for thinking about religious and theological topics, I will begin with a concrete example before turning to a more descriptive account of what I am doing in the book.

For many intellectuals, watching the movie *The Passion of the Christ* is unbearable, but not because of the violence and gore that upsets sensitive viewers. It is unbearable partly because it dramatizes once again the split between Christianity and Judaism that derives from the origin of Christianity as a religion. This split can be illuminated through psychoanalysis by considering Freud's concept of the primal scene. Mel Gibson's film presents itself as a documentary, a true account of the last twelve hours of the life of Jesus. Many believers

came away with the mistaken impression that “that’s the way it really was.” Of course, biblical scholars have taught us over the last few centuries that the gospel narratives were composed decades later, near the end of the first century, and that many of these narratives of the passion were framed by the persecution of Christians by Jews, the tensions between Jewish Christians and Gentiles within the Jesus movement, and most importantly the Jewish Revolt and the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. This event was interpreted by the Christians as God’s judgment on the Jews, and the spectacular failure of the revolt (in which many Christians participated, and which mostly wiped out the Jewish Christian community in Jerusalem) taught the Christians a lesson about the futility of challenging Roman power.

This process set in motion attempts to whitewash Roman complicity in the death of Jesus, and the Jews became a convenient scapegoat. At the same time, Paul’s letters and teachings, written in the 50s and 60s, became more relevant, and were seized upon to justify the spread of Christianity to the Gentiles and away from the Jews. Although Paul’s desire to spread the faith to Greeks was an interim practice, and he did not desire a permanent separation between Jews and pagan Christians, this split became permanent with the destruction of the Second Temple. The cut between Jewish and non-Jewish Christians concerned the practice of circumcision and the question whether one had to be circumcised—and therefore Jewish—to become Christian. On the other hand, Paul argues in Romans 2:28–29 that circumcision binds one under the law, and literal circumcision is less important than the “true” circumcision of the heart. He believed Christ came to overcome these literal cuts or separations, to create a new humanity in which there is no Greek or Jew. Paul’s rift between Jewish and Greek Christians was supposed to lead to reconciliation upon the imminent return of Christ, but with the Jewish Revolt this cut became a tear. The tearing away of Christianity from Judaism, accomplished by the failure of the Jewish Revolt, was symbolized by the tearing of the curtain in the Temple upon the death of Christ. This event, told in Luke 23:46, is magnified in *The Passion of the Christ* into an actual earthquake that rends the floor of the Temple.

This complex historical account involves the construction of what Kathleen Biddick calls the “typological imaginary,” the assumption of a linear history cut into two, a “that was then,” associated with Judaism, and a “this is now,” identified with Christianity. In *The Typological Imaginary: Circumcision, Technology, History*, Biddick traces

medieval, modern, and postmodern effects of this typological imaginary, which continues to function and is alive and well in *The Passion of the Christ*. Anti-Semitism is an effect of the typological imaginary—that is, the need to separate Christians from Jews—or the old order from the new one. The typological imaginary gives rise to graphic technologies that reinscribe it into new situations, including more recently the imagining of a strict boundary, “an impassable divide between premodernity (history with a small ‘h’) and modernity (history with a capital ‘H’).”¹ This is a fetishization of temporal periodization, modernity as the supercession of premodernity, which Biddick traces to the original periodization wrought by the distinction between Christians and Jews. Jews function within the Christian typological imaginary as an uncanny survival, a source of anxiety that compels Christians to delimit or deface Jews in contemporary history, or erase them altogether. And this strange desire is inherent in Christian identity itself from the beginning.

The beginning of Christianity, read psychoanalytically, represents a primal scene. According to Freud, the primal scene, which Lacan translates as “an-other” scene, is paradigmatically represented in his case study of the Wolf Man. In *From the History of an Infantile Neurosis*, Freud analyzes and reconstitutes a primal scene from the phobia induced by a dream of wolves in a tree, terrifying him. Freud works through various screen memories to arrive at the original scene, which is an experience of the Wolf Man at one and a half years old coming upon his parents engaging in intercourse from behind, “in the manner of animals.” The dream conveys a conscious fear of castration that was sparked by this earlier experience. Freud insists upon the real historical occurrence of this primal scene, although he struggles and wrestles with the problems and difficulties concerning whether it “really” happened. Freud finally declares that he is not sure whether it really happened, but ultimately it does not matter because of its overwhelming psychic reality.

The important notion that Freud develops through this analysis is the concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, or aftereffect. The trauma is divided into two parts: the event itself, which is inaccessible in conventional symbolic and historical reality, although it is posited as real and therefore it must have happened; and the coming-to-consciousness of this event, its symptoms, and effects. Here is a different model of temporality from linear historicity because there is a timeless connection between the primal scene and its irruption into history or consciousness. The primal scene occurs at one and a half for the Wolf

Man, but it manifests itself symptomatically when he is four years old. Here is the uncanny nature of trauma, however: It cannot be traced to a simple literal origin, and it can manifest itself afresh years later.²

In her book, *In Search of Dreamtime*, Tomoko Masuzawa carefully works through the complicated process of Freud's analysis and his understanding of its significance, and she makes a connection between the primal scene of the Wolf Man and the murder of the father by the primal horde in *Totem and Taboo*. Masuzawa suggests that the psychic significance of Freud's thought re-founds a notion of time that is other than linear history because it is based upon the mechanism of *Nachträglichkeit*. Freud insists upon the reality of the primal patricide, even though it cannot be located anywhere in history. Instead of criticizing Freud for his mythmaking, Masuzawa suggests that Freud's thought helps to undo the distinction between modern and premodern. She suggests that the search for the origin of religion in history is impossible, not because of our ignorance and the fallibility of our historical tools, but because origins always concern dreamtime, or a trauma that occurs outside of history that distributes its effects within history, constituting history as narrative or myth. Our myths, our stories, are the dreamtime, which is "a story told on sand."³

We can easily make the leap from Wolf Man back to the primal horde, and then forward to *Moses and Monotheism*, which hypothesizes the murder of Moses as another primal scene, this time one that creates what becomes Judaism. Here *Nachträglichkeit* functions explicitly as the return of the repressed. Finally, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ links the other three primal scenes into a series. Freud considers the death of Jesus in relation to the hypothetical murder of Moses in *Moses and Monotheism*, and claims that in terms of its sacrifice of a strict monotheism, the primal scene of Christianity represents a regression compared to that of Judaism: "the Christian religion did not keep to the lofty heights of spirituality to which the Jewish religion had soared."⁴ Despite the fact that Freud suggests that the origin of Jewish religion is Egyptian, he argues that paganism corrupts Christianity, with its polytheistic influence upon the doctrine of God that splits God into two and then three. This corruption is the cause of Christian anti-Semitism. On the one hand, Christianity is "right" in its doctrine of the killing of God, which repeats the murder of Moses and the killing of the father by the primal horde, because it acknowledges that "we" killed God. On the other

hand, there is an almost schizophrenic split, because Christians divide God into Father and Son, and, in addition, blame part of their number (the Jews) for the death of God, while absolving the others. (Although Mel Gibson *says* that we are all responsible for the death of Christ, his film *shows* certain groups of people as more responsible than others.) Freud suggests that “the deeper motives of anti-Semitism have their roots in times long past; they come from the unconscious,” an unconscious in which Christians are “badly christened” and remain “what their ancestors were, barbarically polytheistic.”⁵ At bottom, the hatred of Jews by Christians is diagnosed by Freud as a hatred for Christianity, because these Christians do not want to truly understand what Christianity is essentially about.

One of the most important notions here is the repetition of primal scenes, so that neither the primal scene of Christianity nor the primal scene of Judaism is the original primal scene. According to Freud, “it is an attractive suggestion that the guilt attached to the murder of Moses may have been the stimulus for the wish-fantasy of the Messiah.”⁶ The original primal scene is the killing of the father by the primal horde of *Totem and Taboo*, which founds both culture and religion. It is also the most difficult to locate in historical reality. On the other hand, the intensity of the crucifixion as the primal scene of Christianity possesses such incredible power precisely because we know that it occurred as a historical event. At the same time, we cannot precisely locate it despite the appearance of the gospel narratives as eyewitnesses and the impressive tools of biblical scholarship.

The primal scene of Christianity is presented as if everyone is there, observing the most important event in history. But the crucifixion implies that nobody was there to view it: The disciples all fled, and Jesus is alone in his agony, except for at most a couple of thieves and handful of disinterested soldiers. Its significance was delayed and deferred throughout Christian history, although these after-effects only served to increase the explosiveness of the event itself. According to Andrew Shanks, the historical trauma inflicted upon the early Christian community was the persecution it suffered at the hands of others. The problem then came when Christianity was converted from a minority to a majority tradition.

The trouble is that, when it eventually came to power, the machine for surviving persecution . . . so easily became a most effective machine for persecuting. The very qualities which had originally equipped the church to survive also now equipped it to persecute.⁷

The crucifixion functioned as an attractor, drawing all of these later experiences of trauma into its orbit. It is only in retrospect that the crucifixion itself took on such momentous importance, and so that importance was read back into the event, at the same time as the effects of the event tore through time and space in an enormous work of *Nachträglichkeit*, which is the return of the repressed, the killing of the Messiah that is ultimately the killing of God. The scene took decades, at least, to construct and then centuries to reconstruct, and its power and potency funded centuries of violence and anti-Semitism, although this was only one of its many effects (but not the least important by far).

Against Orthodoxy

As this discussion of the primal scene of Christianity implies, psychoanalytic insights can shed important light upon religious histories and ideas, although such insights are often controversial and unorthodox. An encounter between theology or philosophy of religion and psychoanalytic theory from Freud to Lacan and Žižek can be read as a work against orthodoxy. Its fidelity is to the intrinsic radicalism of theological thinking itself, rather than any figure, church, or school. Today, contemporary postmodern theology as represented in the works of John Milbank and Jean-Luc Marion takes up the challenges of continental philosophy to recover an orthodox theological vision. Marion and Milbank, and many of their American theological readers, take postmodern thought seriously to get beyond it. This attempt to restore orthodoxy in Christian faith and belief occurs at the same time as a cultural and political turn toward more conservative and evangelical forms of religious life, however much Milbank and Marion deplore these political and cultural forms of conservative Christianity. The postmodern theology of Milbank, Marion, and others that promotes orthodoxy betrays the radical promise and possibility of postmodern theology, at least in terms of its American origins.

Postmodern theology in the United States developed out of an engagement with the Death of God theology of Thomas J. J. Altizer, William Hamilton, Richard Rubenstein, Gabriel Vahanian, and others. By reading the German hermeneutic philosophy of Heidegger and Gadamer along with French poststructuralism and deconstruction together under the pressure of the death of God, the postmodern theology that emerged in the early 1980s with Mark C. Taylor,

Charles Winquist, Carl Raschke, and others twisted free of orthodoxy. Because Death of God theologies repudiated Barth's theology of biblical revelation, American radical theologians were able to encounter postmodern philosophy and creatively deploy it in new and important ways. As Raschke puts it in a collection of manifesto-style essays called *Deconstruction and Theology*, "deconstruction is the death of God put into writing," although in retrospect this thesis could be broadened to include postmodern theology in general.⁸ Mark C. Taylor's *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology*, published in 1984, provides the *locus classicus* of postmodern theology with its four broad themes: the death of God, the disappearance of the self, the end of history, and the closure of the book.⁹ In 1986, Charles Winquist published *Epiphanies of Darkness*, a densely complex epistemological work that inscribes Freudian and Lacanian themes of desire into theological thinking.¹⁰ For Winquist, theological thinking manifests a complex desire for a "thinking that does not disappoint," but it does not thereby ignore or avoid messy and difficult questions including those posed by psychoanalytic theory.¹¹

This book continues that original trajectory, despite a counter-movement that has alternatively opposed and appropriated postmodern theological thinking in an attempt to restore orthodoxy. One version of postmodern theology that desires a restoration of orthodoxy is Radical Orthodoxy, which advertises itself as a post-secular philosophy. For Radical Orthodoxy, postmodern insights can be appreciated and appropriated, especially those that suggest a phenomenology of religious experience that sanctions the space for belief in a traditional or quasi-traditional manner. At the same time, the insights of psychoanalysis must be opposed and denigrated for theology to assert itself. Along these lines, Phillip Blond claims that psychoanalysis is "an essentially atheistic discourse" that cannot "reconcile a theological conceptuality."¹² Radical Orthodoxy can appropriate phenomenology for its theological ends, but it is forced to suppress or deny psychoanalytic insight. If psychoanalysis is incompatible with Radical Orthodoxy, then the question arises whether it is essentially incompatible with any theological orthodoxy. If this is the case, then what would it mean to construct an image of theological thinking in the context of psychoanalytic theory? Such a theology would necessarily be a radical theology, and it would be opposed to orthodoxy.

In addition to neoorthodox theologies, another important theoretical alternative has emerged—a continental philosophy of religion

that directs the tools of continental philosophy to an analysis of religion and religious experience. This continental philosophy of religion is heavily influenced by the thought of Levinas and Derrida and is most notably associated with the work of John D. Caputo. Caputo's work follows the turn toward a conceptual grappling with the phenomenon of religion in Derrida's philosophy, and Caputo—especially in his influential book *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*—accentuates the affirmative openness toward religion and religious belief suggested by Derrida's work.¹³ Caputo, as a representative of continental philosophy of religion, has kept his distance from theology, suspicious of its status as “onto-theology,” following Heidegger's critique. While Caputo favors a religion without religion, an open space for faith that would not be determined by orthodoxy, many representatives of the continental philosophy of religion employ the philosophies of a broad phenomenological tradition from Kierkegaard and Husserl to Heidegger, Levinas, and Derrida for the sake of a faith that in its belief and profession could be considered broadly orthodox, at least in a formal sense.¹⁴

The contemporary orthodoxy I am working against is not a Platonic orthodoxy—a set of correct opinions—but has to do with right beliefs in a modern and postmodern context. It is not literally a classical theological orthodoxy either, but more accurately a formal neo-orthodoxy. Contemporary orthodoxy in postmodern theology concerns the tremendous effort to affirm a belief in belief itself, above all the rightness of the Christian belief in a broad sense, although it is not fundamentalist in terms of its subscription to particular doctrines and dogmas.¹⁵ The goal is to restore belief in Christianity's rightness, or at least to delineate a theoretical space within which Christian belief has at least as much validity as any other belief. Radical Orthodoxy aims more directly at the former goal, whereas much phenomenology of religion concerns itself with the latter. The problem with any variety of orthodoxy is that it is always Right, no matter how profound its phenomenological voice or how radical its commitment to any social or political theory. From the standpoint of psychoanalytic theory, orthodoxy expresses a powerful desire for faith and justified belief, even if contemporary theologies are sophisticated enough to understand the difficulties of attaining such beliefs in a credible manner, and contemporary orthodox theologies are forced to deploy complicated postmodern methodologies. The forceful expression of desire in itself is not enough to guarantee the object of desire. We can be suspicious of the nature of desire, having been

duped by its duplicity before. We are not innocent, though we crave a second naiveté. At the same time, suspicion is not certainty, and to question the object or even the adequacy of desire is not the same thing as denying the possibility of its goal, or disavowing the desire itself.

If continental philosophy of religion itself is neutral, and keeps its distance from theology, this is both an asset and a weakness. The strength is that the phenomenological and philosophical readings are solid and are uncompromised by theological agendas. The weakness is that with the resurgence of orthodox varieties of postmodern theology, a continental philosophy of religion becomes unable to contest these theologies on their own grounds. This abdication forecloses any direct engagement with theological desire and ignores the significance of Freudian and Lacanian thought in postmodern theory. Continental philosophy of religion has ignored or downplayed the importance of psychoanalytic thought within French postmodernism.¹⁶

Derrida has consistently affirmed the importance of psychoanalytic thinking, even though he has questioned and critiqued both Freud and Lacan in important ways. In a strange non-encounter with Hans-Georg Gadamer, Derrida posed three brief questions, which Gadamer mostly either dismissed or misunderstood. After suggesting that Gadamer appeals to a Kantian notion of a “good will,” Derrida asks what happens to good will “if one wants to integrate a psychoanalytic hermeneutic into a general hermeneutic?”¹⁷ This central question is directed against Gadamer’s assumption that the overall goal of discourse is understanding. Gadamer interprets Derrida’s critical question as indicating a breach or a rupture within the process of understanding, which is what Gadamer is trying to overcome. Gadamer claims that “psychoanalytic interpretation does not seek to understand what someone wants to say, but instead what that person doesn’t want to say or even admit to him or herself.”¹⁸ For this reason, psychoanalysis must be excluded from hermeneutics. On the other hand, Derrida’s question suggests a more radical hermeneutics that involves attending to the ruptures that necessitate a “discontinuous re-structuring” of discourse.

This book is an attempt to unsettle contemporary postmodern theology and continental philosophy of religion by taking up psychoanalytic theory and its continuing significance in and for religious thought. This is not a scholarly book “on” Freud, or “on” Lacan, but rather a book that seeks to inscribe Freudian and Lacanian thought into theological thinking in such a way that unsettles both theology

and psychoanalysis. My readings follow the opening provided by Paul Ricoeur in *Freud and Philosophy*, which provides an epistemological reading of Freud as opposed to a scientific or a clinical/therapeutic reading.¹⁹ In fact, the issues of reduction and sublimation are at the core of any attempt to think about religion in the context of psychoanalytic theory.²⁰

The Sublime From Kant to Freud and Beyond

In *A Theology of the Sublime* I trace a link between the transcendental imagination in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the notion of the sublime in the *Critique of Judgment*, relying on the insights of Heidegger, Lyotard, Derrida, and Deleuze.²¹ At the same time, I argue that this reading is a theological reading by appealing to the thought of Paul Tillich. I suggest that the sublime, broadly understood, constitutes what Tillich calls the depth aspect of existence. In a sense, religion in the modern world can be defined as sublime; that is, what exceeds or resists the modern project of representation even as religion is ever the acknowledged or unacknowledged object of modern representation.

This book reads the Kantian sublime forward into Freud and Lacan, suggesting that psychoanalytic theory represents an elaboration of the Kantian sublime, even as it diffuses and bifurcates it. This reading follows the opening provided by Ricoeur's epistemological reading of Freud, which is essentially a Kantian reading. Ricoeur writes under the pressure of Lacan—although he fails to directly engage Lacan—but Ricoeur does develop a theoretical understanding of what is at stake between a language of force and a language of meaning. At the same time, Ricoeur inscribes teleology into Freud's thinking of sublimation, which allows him to restore Freudian psychoanalysis to meaning in a broadly Hegelian way.²² I treat Ricoeur's reading of Freud in more detail in chapter 1, "On Sublimation," which also deals with the general question of sublimation and its relevance for understanding religion.

For Kant, the sublime is clearly located within the subject, not within the object. The disorientation provoked by the process of sublime judgment indicates a discord at the heart of the self, and this process prefigures the complexity and disorientation within the self diagnosed by psychoanalysis. In fact, according to Lacan, the psychoanalytic subject is modern and begins with Kant.²³ The Kantian sublime is characterized by an oscillation or trembling that occurs when the human being attempts to represent something that cannot

be simply represented within human understanding. This sets off a struggle between imagination and reason to set things aright, and restore representation to its proper place. Imagination loses, but reason declares that its victory is essentially a moral victory and it reflects a human dignity that transcends the might of nature.²⁴

The Freudian sublime calls reason's moral victory into question and accelerates the disorientation, suggesting that the self is composed of conflicting drives that can at best constitute an unstable and precarious accord. What I am calling the Freudian sublime indicates two distinct tendencies in Freud's thought: the notion of sublimation on the one hand, and trauma—or the death drive—on the other. These two processes cannot be thought separately, but must be seen as profoundly interrelated. Traumatic events open up holes—interstices that must then become stitched together in a complex process of sublimation that makes us who and what we are. The stitches are what Lacan calls quilting points, and they form knots or folds that open up a window on the Real as they simultaneously weave imaginary and symbolic discourses together.²⁵ A reading of the Freudian sublime as it is elaborated by Lacan, Kristeva, Žižek, and others, opens up a window to psychoanalytic concepts and conceptions as they pressure religious and theological understandings and self-understandings. Disorientation is necessarily unsettling, but it can also possess a certain revelatory intensity as it forces theological thinking to take into account its own unconscious desires, anxieties, and motivations. The psychoanalytic sublime refers to the uncanny and disorienting feeling of discord at the base of conscious reflection. This uncanny feeling before, behind, or other than conscious intentionality makes all determinate conscious reflection tremble, and this is a religious sensation or experience that demands honest theological reflection and articulation.

This book consists of distinct but related and overlapping readings that cluster around specific themes linked broadly to ideas of sublimation and creation. My goal is not to provide a seamless narrative but to open up spaces for theological reflection under the pressure of psychoanalytic theory from Freud to Lacan and Žižek. In chapter 2, "We Are All Mad: Theology in the Shadow of a Black Sun," I discuss theology and schizophrenia as represented in the image of the black sun, which includes a reading of Freud's case study of Judge Schreber along with insights from R. D. Laing, Gilles Deleuze, and Jacques Derrida. Schizophrenia becomes a problem that demands a broadly theological schizoanalysis, rather than simply a medical

condition. Chapter 3, “Desiring the Thing,” opens up the question of the ethics of psychoanalysis by considering the desire for the Thing discussed by Lacan in his Seminar VII. The desire for the Thing is beyond good and evil in a conventional moral sense, and indicates a powerful desire for what Lacan calls the Real. Sublimation is necessary because we cannot approach the Real in itself, but it is also problematic because it does not simply overcome the insistence of the Real in ethical and theological discourse. I return to the question of ethics—more explicitly in relation to God and the good—in chapter 8, “God Without Being (God),” which brings in a consideration of Marion’s reading of Anselm’s proof of God in relation to being. Here I critique Marion’s reading in Lacanian terms by suggesting that “greater” cannot simply be assumed to be good in (human) moral terms. More than being, we want God to be good, but psychoanalysis suggests that this is not a simple want, and theology’s God may be more subtle and ambivalent than many are prepared to admit.

Chapters 4, 5, and 8 each take up aspects of theological thinking about God, pressured by psychoanalytic insights in the wake of the death of God. Chapter 4, “Foreclosing God,” considers the complex topic of foreclosure and combines a reading of Freud and Lacan with a consideration of Heidegger and Julia Kristeva. Foreclosure is not the same as disavowal, and if we foreclose God in a certain way we do not shut down but rather open up theological thinking. Chapter 5, “Anxiety and the S(ub)lime Body of God,” considers the topic of anxiety, especially the anxiety of the body in relation to traditional thought about the divine and the human. I attend to Freud’s reversal in his understanding of the relationship between anxiety and repression, and Slavoj Žižek’s interpretations of Lacan in relation to Kant, to suggest a distinction between repression and anxiety in contemporary theology. Chapter 8, as mentioned above, deals with the relations between God and being and God and the good after Heidegger’s critique of ontotheology, and revisits Anselm’s proof of God under the pressure of Lacan’s seminar on *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*.

Chapters 4, 5, and 8 are wrapped around chapters 6 and 7, “Ages of the World and Creation *ex Nihilo*,” which develops an understanding of creation *ex nihilo* out of a confrontation of Lacan and Tillich. The notion of creation in Lacan’s work is introduced in chapter 3, but here it is explicitly related to Tillich and Schelling. A confrontation emerges out of a contrast between Tillich and Žižek in their respective readings of Schelling, and I provide my own reading of the second draft of Schelling’s *Ages of the World*. The psycho-theological

concept of creation *ex nihilo* rests at the center of the book and functions as an axis around which the other essays partially pivot.

Chapter 9, “Expressing the Real,” grapples with the problem of the Real as expressed at the limits of language and possibly captured by a quasi-mathematical formalization in Lacan’s later work, and these ideas are in turn related to a story by Herman Melville: *Benito Cereno*. Trying to formalize the Real ties us up in knots in many ways. In some ways, expressing the Real beyond the limits of language is a Platonic method of approaching the Real. A contemporary expression is Alain Badiou’s mathematical ontology, which is strongly influenced by Lacan.²⁶ On the other hand, one can understand the Real more in terms of a process, and in chapter 10, “Processing the Real,” I sketch out a trajectory from Aristotle through Spinoza and Whitehead to Deleuze and Lacan. Lacan can be read either in more Platonic or in more Aristotelian terms, but I argue that it is ultimately more fruitful to understand him in an Aristotelian manner. In addition, both chapters 9 and 10 provide distinct perspectives on Lacan’s interpretation of the Real in *Seminar XX*.

In this book, then, I inscribe psychoanalytic theory into theology, primarily to unsettle theoretical thinking about religion. This discussion of psychoanalysis focuses around the notion of the sublime as it is expressed by Freud and interpreted by Lacan. The sublime is not a term that Freud uses, but I have reconstructed this idea in psychoanalysis by linking it in particular places in chapters 1, 3, and 5 to Kant’s understanding of the sublime. The sublime is the object of sublimation, and the sublime is intrinsically religious. Furthermore, thinking about the sublime theologically is a creative albeit challenging task.

This book proceeds in a progressive although not a linear fashion—themes are developed, then returned to and redeveloped in subsequent chapters. This is not a chronological development, but rather a series of intensive reflections on distinct but overlapping themes. One image for this book could be that of a series of stepping stones that are not contiguous but create deep impressions in a sequential but winding manner. Between the stones, lines of grass, or filaments grow and connect the steps in a rhizomatic manner, to borrow a metaphor from Deleuze and Guattari.

Another way to think about this book is in terms of a circular orbit. Hopefully the circle is not a vicious circle, but rather is open at both ends. In many ways the book is centered on the middle chapters (4–8) that most explicitly deal with God. Furthermore, the book

is specifically centered on the interpretation of creation *ex nihilo* that is developed in chapters 6 and 7. In some ways, the earlier chapters are essays or partial attempts that build up to this interpretation, which is an extensive reading of Schelling and Tillich in relation to Žižek and Lacan. In addition, in some ways the last three chapters consist of echoes or aftereffects of this central reading, as creation is implicated in God, the Real, and Substance. Throughout the entire book, the theme of sublimation persists, even if it becomes less obvious, although even sublimation is subordinated to the sublime, which goes by multiple names, including God, the Thing, the Other, the Real, and Substance.

These chapters constitute complex attempts to trace the sublime through Freud and Lacan and beyond, and indicate theological effects. Psychoanalysis resists theology even as theology resists psychoanalytic insights in an analogous way to the contested relationships between philosophy and psychoanalytic theory in France and elsewhere. At the same time, this struggle is necessary and vital to fashion a vital radical theology, a theology that is responsive to the death of God.

Psychotheology After the Death of God

The phrase, “death of God,” can be understood in at least two distinct ways. In a metaphysical sense, God dies and in Hegelian fashion becomes immanent in and as the world. This is the viewpoint of Thomas J. J. Altizer’s theology from *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* onwards.²⁷ The death of God is the kenotic self-sacrifice of God to be resurrected otherwise, in an ongoing process that points to a metaphysical end of history that would constitute a radical reconciliation of opposites. On the other hand, the death of God can be assimilated to the linguistic turn, in which the being of God is dissolved into language non-metaphysically. For Charles Winquist, following the linguistic turn means reflexively attending to theological formulations as discourse formations in the fashioning of a “theological tropology” in which “the concept of argument is itself deconstructed by reading the tropes or turns in language that characterize the discourse as levers of intervention.”²⁸ A turn toward psychoanalytic theory—especially that of Lacan, who focuses overwhelmingly on language and integrates linguistics into psychoanalysis—enables one to better understand the theological implications of the linguistic turn.

If the being of God is dissolved into language, and if that is what the “death of God” means, or at least one meaning of the death of God, then the problem that results is the question of desire in language. Following the linguistic turn, along with any and all other “turns,” theology must attend to that in which it is implicated, a turn from being—ontology in a Tillichian sense—to language. The question of desire results directly from the twentieth-century formulations of psychoanalysis, which transforms the nineteenth-century preoccupation with will into questions about desires and drives. If theological thinking signifies at least as much about the desire of the theologian (the desire for God) as it does about God in itself, then theology must attend to its expressions and formulations as indicating desire in a secular as well as a religious sense. Freud, Lacan, Kristeva, and Žižek provide theoretical tools to interrogate desire, and this interrogation possesses theological implications. This project is important whether or not the twenty-first century will overcome or transform the problem of desire as well as move beyond the issue of language. Such developments may be prophesied, but their truth remains to be seen.

If the metonymical object of desire is God, but God cannot be expressed as a referential object referred to by language or a concept within language, then in light of the linguistic turn this limit of language is felt as the death of God rather than as an inadequacy of language. Kristeva writes about “the crisis of truth in language,” which refers to the interminable (not necessarily infinite) substitutability of words, concepts, and objects, without any ground or foundation. This means that the theological desire for God may function as a mask for other desires—political, psychological, ideological, and economic desires, among others. The substitutability and undecidability of desire, from an epistemological standpoint, converges with the acceleration of these substitutions in both a cultural and technological sense, which leans toward a schizophrenic limit in the interplay of desires and meanings.

Analytic description and prescriptive intervention are necessarily conjoined, and it is an open question whether our awareness of the duplicity of language prevents it from being recharged, or whether we will have to turn elsewhere for our salvation in a desperate grasp for transcendence that—from the standpoint of language—appears rather to be a return to naive realism. We are saturated in multivalent and polyvalent meanings, overwhelmed with “doublespeak” and ambiguity at a personal, social, and political level. These significations

mask the “real” workings of the machinery of our global economy, whose engines turn exceedingly fast and grind exceedingly fine. I think we have to refuse any forced choice of either/or, the option of being stuck with language and the danger of its duplicity or thrust into a reality that is over-determined to mask the openness and ambiguity of its significations.

We have life, we have theory, and their interrelations are not simply dialectical. If we have passion in life, we should in no way disavow passion in theory, and this conclusion possesses religious implications.²⁹ Since science contests the Real, from a psychoanalytic point of view it functions “as a species of theology,” whereas psychoanalysis “questions the manner by which its artifacts become real, and through the relation that represents desire, the relation between self and other.”³⁰ We cannot simply or essentially separate theology as a discourse that contests the Real by representing it from psychoanalysis as a discourse that questions the manner and stakes of such representation. We can, however, establish a circuit between psychoanalytic theory and theology in hopes that it will prove to be a productive circuit by working (through) the sublime, which is at once sublimation and deconstruction of the Real, or the religious.

Eric Santner coins the phrase “psychotheology of everyday life” to suggest the link between a psychoanalytically informed view of life and religious experience and expression. According to Santner, Freudian psychoanalysis in its “spiritual” dimension attends to “the constitutive ‘too muchness’ that characterizes the psyche.”³¹ Santner claims that both the Jewish tradition in which Freud was steeped as well as Christianity testify that “human life always includes more reality than it can contain and this ‘too much’ bears witness to a spiritual and moral calling, a pressure toward self-transformation, toward ‘goodness.’”³² This understanding of Judaism and Christianity is fully secular in that it does not locate the “too muchness” above or outside the world in a transcendent way, but rather within it. The fact that we are always “too much” is both a problem and a challenge that spurs self-transformation, despite the resistances that psychoanalysis uncovers that teach us that knowledge is a brutal struggle, because, as Žižek says, “the fundamental desire is the desire *not* to know too much.”³³

Santner reads Franz Rosenzweig along with Freud to draw out this spiritual aspect of Freud’s thought. Ultimately, “God is above all the name for the pressure to be alive to the world, to open to the too

much of pressure generated in large measure by the uncanny presence of my neighbor."³⁴ This pressure and this experience occur within the midst of everyday life rather than in an otherworldly realm. Although Santner does not consider the specific violence that takes place between Christianity and Judaism, which are the most uncanny of neighbors, he does point to a way forward for thinking about their affinity within the context of a psychoanalytic space. A psychotheology inscribes a contemporary radical theological thinking after the death of God into the chaos of our postmodern world, without falling for the seductive trappings of orthodoxy. Working through the complex interrelationships of sublimation, creation, and the sublime in this book unfortunately does not reassure us that God loves and cares for us, but it does open a space for serious theological reflection.