



Wittgenstein’s *Unglauben*: Jacques Lacan and the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

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Published online: 30 June 2022
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Abstract Jacques Lacan devoted one of the sessions of his important Seminar XVII, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, to Ludwig Wittgenstein’s classic work *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Despite Lacan’s and Wittgenstein’s huge influence across academic disciplines (and the analytic–continental divide in philosophy), there has been no scholarly attempt to examine Lacan’s claims concerning Wittgenstein in this seminar. This paper sets out to redress this gap in the literature. Specifically, we look at the context of the engagement; Lacan’s reconstruction of Wittgenstein’s arguments; their differing conceptions of truth, knowledge and the subject; and the issue of Wittgenstein’s seemingly “psychotic” position.

Keywords psychoanalysis · philosophy · psychology · logic · truth

Jacques Derrida amuses himself in *The Post Card* (1980) by imagining the impossible confrontation between Martin Heidegger and Sigmund Freud, two landmark figures in twentieth century thought. Someone else might point to a counterfactual meeting of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Jacques Lacan as an impossible summative of twentieth century philosophy, spanning both its “analytic–continental divide” and its “linguistic turn.” Psychoanalysis is after all a form of analysis, and in Lacan’s work asserts the absolute centrality of language in Freud’s discovery of the unconscious and its manifestations. On the other hand, Wittgenstein arguably belongs to the ancient sceptical legacy that considered philosophy as ideally a form of therapy, at least for errant beliefs, if not for the structure of desire (Crary & Read, 2000; Hadot, 2004).

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Such a meeting of Lacan and Wittgenstein of course did not take place; Wittgenstein died in 1951, having written not one but two books that revolutionized Anglo-American philosophy. Nevertheless, Jacques Lacan did discuss Wittgenstein several times in his seminars, and addressed the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921/1922; hereafter *TLP*) in some detail. Lacan in fact devoted a large part of one of the sessions of Seminar XVII, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, on the “four discourses” (those of the master, university, hysteric and analyst) to the early Wittgenstein’s classic work. This engagement with the younger Wittgenstein, moreover, is anticipated in earlier years by sessions examining the works of Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell, both of whom had a formative influence upon Wittgenstein and the Anglo-American analytic-philosophical scene within which the *TLP* is generally located.

Nonetheless, there has so far been little scholarly analysis of Lacan’s reading of Wittgenstein, despite all that this apparent confrontation between two discursive worlds promises. Wittgenstein’s own writings on Freud have been examined by scholars, and several articles have even compared his and Lacan’s readings of the founder of psychoanalysis (Benvenuto, 2006; Livingston, 2018; Rumpler, 2011). Maria Balaska’s recent book *Wittgenstein and Lacan at the Limit: Meaning and Astonishment* (2019) examines the two thinkers’ conceptions of groundlessness and creativity. But it does not address Lacan’s own, somewhat astonished, critique of Wittgenstein in Seminar XVII. We can surmise that this reflects the state of specialization in academic scholarship. Few are the readers who have ventured both into Wittgenstein’s formidably difficult early work, as well as Lacan’s differently inaccessible oeuvre.

This paper, then, proposes to break new analytic ground by examining Lacan’s key claims. Our analysis hence culminates in an interpretation of Lacan’s attempts to decipher Wittgenstein’s “desire” in the text, and his striking, initially counterintuitive, claim that “Wittgenstein wasn’t interested in saving the truth. Nothing can be said about it” (Lacan, 1991/2007, p. 55). The paper has two main parts. Part 1 situates Lacan’s turn to Wittgenstein in Seminar XVII by tracking his previous engagements with Wittgenstein, Frege and Russell. It then reconstructs Wittgenstein’s position in the *TLP*, as expounded in Lacan’s commentary. Part 2 then examines Lacan’s psychoanalytic critique of the *TLP* in Seminar XVII, read as a document which registers the structure of the author’s desire, and how it stands in regard to the question of the truth of subjectivity, the principal object of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Our concluding remarks reflect upon the status and validity of Lacan’s claim that the *TLP* embodies a meaningfully “psychotic” stance, and how it relates to the discourse of the analyst.

Part 1: Putting Salt on the Tail (Bringing Wittgenstein to Lacan)

Lacan’s engagement with Wittgenstein arguably begins as early as Seminar I (1953–1954), and becomes increasingly manifest from Seminar IX onward, culminating in the dedicated session in Seminar XVII. Lacan in Seminar I, with his regular attendee and sometimes guest speaker, Father Beirnaert, discusses St.



Augustine's theory of language, which is also literally the first reference point for Wittgenstein in his second major work, *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein, 1953/1986; hereafter *PI*). In Seminar I, moreover, we find a direct allusion, noted by the English translator, John Forrester, to proposition #32 of Wittgenstein's *PI*, on the "world already structured by language" (Lacan, 1975/1988, p. 259). As Sergio Benvenuto (2006, section 8) notes, "when Wittgenstein shows that language is always public, he means that we are always included in this language: it finds our connection with the world, we do not find it," in a way that reflects Lacan's view of the human being as a *parlêtre*. *Mutatis mutandis*, for Lacan, as Benvenuto also rightly notes, the most private language is still contained within an Other, public discourse. It is this Other which:

gives me the rules to recognize my wishes, desires, identities, representations, as myself. Of course my feeling in pain or happy or enjoying are private, but when I have to represent to myself what I feel or what I have felt, my dwelling in the language alienates all that in representations (signifiers): I can see or experience myself only as a linguistic object or representation (as the Other's thing). (Benvenuto, 2006, section 6)

In the 1960s, Lacan becomes particularly interested in the topic of logic, reflecting his involvement with a number of philosophy graduates surrounding the journal *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*. He often refers, during this period, to the key figures of logical-positivist thinking: Russell, Frege and Wittgenstein chiefly. Yet Lacan and the *Cahiers* group soon reached a tricky impasse between logic and psychoanalysis on the prickly topic of the "subject." Nonetheless, even here, the terrain does overlap with Wittgenstein's own. Indeed, in the *TLP*, Wittgenstein isolates an "I-function" in philosophy which, although not identical to it, does resonate with Lacan's conceptions of the "subject" at the time. "The philosophical I," for Wittgenstein namely, "is not the man, not the human body or the human soul of which psychology treats, but the metaphysical subject, the limit—not a part of the world" (Wittgenstein, 1921/1922, 5.641).¹ Various attempts are made by Lacan and the *Cahiers* crew – for instance in Jacques-Alain Miller's concept of suture and Alain Badiou's (1969) critical claim that "science may be called the psychosis of no subject" – to formalize the subject in purely logical terms.

Seminar IX (1961–1962) marks the beginning of Lacan's sustained engagement with logic. Despite earlier indications that he had read Russell and Wittgenstein, it is in this year that he begins to consider the principle of identity and other problems found in their works in detail. Similarly, it is the first year of his critical engagement with Frege (via his *Foundations of Arithmetic*). In the same decade, in Seminar XIV, Lacan explicitly engages with Wittgenstein in his reflections on how fantasy, essential to all speaking subjects, relates to the grammatical structure governing language. Those parts of our "selves" which are disavowed, that which "I am not," related to the Freudian id and the unconscious, nevertheless underlie all language use, he argues. At issue is the "refusal of being" at the heart of what Lacan calls alienation. Despite this refusal, Lacan contends, the "I" remains in a constant relation to a thing-which-thinks, the *pense-chose*, commensurate with one's "forced" entry into language. Here, Lacan (n.d., p. 84) stresses the importance of



Wittgenstein's *TLP*, in contrast to what he dubs the many other "insipid and mediocre considerations" of the logical-positivists. In its "attempt to articulate what results from a consideration of logic in so far as it can do without any existence of the subject, [it] is well worth following in all its details and I recommend you to read it," he states (Lacan, n.d., p.84). The Freudian, however, must *add* to this account and consider that the drive is also inherently related to the grammatical structure: "No doubt, nothing can be *said* about what is involved in these structures. Our experience, nevertheless, affirms to us that it is they that dominate" (Lacan, n.d., p. 85). Far from a few scattered references over decades of lectures and writings, the importance of Wittgenstein's influence on the "logical" Lacan should not therefore be understated. Indeed, in her biography of Lacan, Élisabeth Roudinesco (1997) attributes the inventions of the *matheme* and *lalangue*, as well as the pathway from saying to showing, to this reading.

When in Seminar XVII and the session "Truth, Sister of *Jouissance*," Lacan announces his "little leap" to considering Wittgenstein and the *TLP*, we see, he is in effect making good on his own prior recommendation. The opening reason he gives for a turn to Wittgenstein in this session is because the latter is "the author who has given the most forceful formulation to what results from the enterprise of proposing that the only truth there is is inscribed in a proposition" (Lacan, 1991/2007, p. 59). With that said, Wittgenstein's explicit entrance at this moment of the session is not unheralded within the year's classes. In fact, Wittgenstein had earlier been introduced without being named as a certain logician with "extremist views," who is convinced that there are no objects, "only pseudo-objects" (Lacan, 1991/2007, p. 56). So what is the more particular problematic that shapes Lacan's turn to Wittgenstein at this point in Seminar XVII?

Lacan's invocation of what he calls Wittgenstein's "extremism" (whose radical dimensions we will see as we proceed) comes in the context of a set of reflections turning upon the question of truth in psychoanalysis. In particular, Lacan has been concerned here with truth in the discourse of the analyst, one of the four discourses with which the year is centrally preoccupied. The truth at stake in analysis, Lacan has been commenting, is not "easily accessible" (Lacan, 1991/2007, p. 55). Elsewhere in Seminar XVII, Lacan will play upon the notion that it can only ever be "half-said" (*mi-dire*). This truth that Lacan has in mind is of course, first of all, that which is in play within the formations of the unconscious, led by Freudian slips and jokes. When it is this truth of the unconscious at issue, "non-sense carries the weight" (Lacan, 1991/2007, p. 57). On the one hand, these speech acts are the only ones which we know are always successful, when it is a question of intimating the truth of unconscious desire, Lacan maintains. On the other hand, like the little birds Lacan was told about as a child which could only be caught by putting salt on their tails: "Precisely, the truth flies off. The truth flies off the very moment you no longer wanted to grab it. Moreover, since it didn't have a tail, how could you have?" (Lacan, 1991/2007, p. 57). Lacan evokes here the curious paradox that, whilst dreams for Freud are wish-fulfilments, nevertheless when the truth of unconscious desire comes too close to direct representation, then "a dream wakes you up just when it might let the truth drop, so that the only reason one wakes up is so as to continue dreaming—dreaming in the real or, to be more exact, in reality" (Lacan,



1991/2007, p. 57). It is then only in “a certain lack of sense” like that involved in the parapraxes that “truth, like nature, comes galloping back” into our waking lives, albeit in such a fleeting way that this truth “has scarcely crossed our field before it has already departed on the other side” (Lacan, 1991/2007, p. 57).

Lacan is no doubt having fun at this moment. He will soon pass on to a play with the French privative, *sans*, and the Old French, *senz* (related to *sens*, meaning “sense” or even “reason”), even suggesting that the former derives from the latter (not the Latin *sine*, “without”). We are unable to comment on the validity of this speculation. All that can be said of the relationship of the subject of the unconscious and truth, Lacan concludes, is that speaking subjects are “not-without” (*pas-sans*) the truth, which also does not mean that we can directly and openly speak it: “A litotes, in short, of the fact that when we are within its reach we would happily do without it” (Lacan, 1991/2007, p. 58).

Nevertheless, the association that Lacan is making, with the truth as something which can only emerge in the almost nonsensical formulations of the unconscious, draws him into a close linguistic proximity to several of Wittgenstein’s key terms in the *TLP*. Lacan underscores this proximity when he pauses to reflect on how we should translate the German *sinnlos*, that which is “without sense,” as against *Unsinn*, which is “nonsense.” At immediate issue, Lacan tells us, is whether there could be a truth which at any given moment escapes what we presently know and can directly state in language. Could there be a truth, with that in view, which is hidden and perhaps unstatable, or is it instead the case that anything not presently sayable is only “absent,” not yet stated and known? As Lacan writes of the latter possibility, which he will associate with Wittgenstein in the *TLP*: “This would settle everything if it were so. One would only have to know all that there is to know. After all, why not? When one says something there is no need to add that it is true” (Lacan, 1991/2007, p. 56). It is in Lacan’s acceptance instead of the former, contrary prospect that we see the gulf that separates him from this early Wittgenstein. Lacan distinguishes between knowledge (*savoir*) and a truth (*verité*) which concerns the subject in the position of its enunciation, which “carries the weight,” as he says, “precisely, of existence” (Lacan, 1991/2007, p. 57). Wittgenstein, by contrast, recognizes no such distinction. Instead, he identifies what is true with what can be asserted within a proposition in *TLP*.

The first of what we will say are *three* discernible reasons that underlie Lacan’s turn at this moment of Seminar XVII to the younger Wittgenstein is accordingly to highlight his own position by contrast (the second reason will emerge in Part 2, and the third in our conclusion). Wittgenstein is a figure who articulates what “in knowledge as such...constituted on the basis of propositions—can in all strictness function as truth. That is...articulating what, concerning whatever is proposed, can be said to be true and upheld as true” (Lacan, 1991/2007, p. 59). Let us then briefly recall those salient features of what Lacan calls Wittgenstein’s “world of cogitation,” which will also enable us in Part 2 to understand Lacan’s striking criticism of its limits in light of his contrasting conception of truth and knowledge.

As readers will recall, Wittgenstein commences the *TLP* by telling us, disarmingly, “the world is the totality of facts, not of things” (1.1). Such facts are not objects, as Lacan (1991/2007, p. 56) comments, but states of affairs:



structured relationships between objects in the world. These structured relations can be “pictured” by language, Wittgenstein next maintains. It will be the role of language, with its logical structures, to provide such pictures: the famous “picture theory of meaning.” Language on this model is exclusively denotative: this perspective will remain vital throughout Lacan’s assessment of the Austrian thinker. “The general form of proposition is: Such and such is the case,” as Wittgenstein tells us (*TLP*, 4.5). If we ask the younger Wittgenstein what we should therefore make of such speech acts like orders, promises or jokes – which will become central for his own later self in the *PI* – his answer is that these are not well-formed pictures of the world.

The kinds of propositions that do “make sense” for Wittgenstein are, to use Lacan’s example, directly denotative propositions like “it is day” (Lacan, 1991/2007, p. 60). Such a sentence creates a logical picture of the world: indeed, “logic is not a theory but a reflexion of the world” (*TLP*, 6.13; cf. *PI*, #89, #97).

If there is one feature of this early Wittgensteinian account of language which resonates with Lacan’s, it is that the most basic unit of sense must accordingly be a complete proposition. “Russell” by itself is not yet sense-full or senseless. “Russell was here yesterday,” by contrast, has sense, at least retrospectively, when we reach the end of the statement. And here is the decisive thing, as far as Lacan’s interest in Wittgenstein in Seminar XVII is concerned. If a sentence logically pictures a state of affairs in the world, it can be adjudicated to be either true or false on the traditional correspondence model of truth: that is, by asking whether the picture of the world it shapes for us corresponds to some fact or facts in the world, and the relations between the objects in the state of affairs which these facts involve (Lacan, 1991/2007, p. 60). Each sentence which makes sense then for Wittgenstein is either true or false, and any sentence which cannot be adjudged as true or false in this way will not have made sense.

What Wittgenstein calls “elementary propositions” like “it is raining” picture “atomic facts.” Language as a whole is the sum of all elementary propositions, as Lacan glosses: “nothing can be said” and “nothing is true, except on the condition that one starts from the idea...that a fact is an attribute of an elementary proposition” (Lacan, 1991/2007, p. 60). More complex propositions are just truth-functional compounds of elementary propositions. So, “it is raining and I am cold” is the amalgam of two elementary propositions: “it is raining” and “I am cold.” “Suppose all elementary propositions were given me,” Wittgenstein stipulates, “then we can simply ask: what propositions I can build out of them. And these are *all* propositions and *so* they are limited” (*TLP*, 4.51). Beneath the forbidding logical terminology, there is a crystalline simplicity to this world vision, Lacan notes: “For this author grammatical structure constitutes what he identifies with the world. Grammatical structure is the world. And all that is true is, in short, a composite proposition comprising the totality of facts that constitute the world” (Lacan, 1991/2007, p. 59).

The end result of any philosophical analysis of complex propositions for Wittgenstein will be to bring them analytically back to the elementary propositions, each with its own discretely picturable state of affairs in the world. The truth value of any such complex proposition or collection of propositions in turn will be



completely reducible to, and determined by, the truth value of the elementary propositions. For example, if proposition p is a compound of the elementary propositions P and Q , then for Wittgenstein the truth value of p can be determined by the truth table:

P	Q	$P \wedge Q$
T	T	T
T	F	F
F	T	F
F	F	F

Wittgenstein's position therefore culminates in the claim that, if we could counterfactually know the total set of elementary propositions which were true and false, we would have completely described the world. As Lacan glosses: "For Wittgenstein the world is supported only by facts. No things unless supported by a web of facts. No things, moreover, but that are inaccessible. Facts alone are articulable" (Lacan, 1991/2007, p. 60). For Wittgenstein, the natural sciences provide the sole authoritative source for adjudicating which states of affairs exist in the world. As such, these sciences exhaust what can be said with "sense" about the world. Hence, the "totality of true propositions is the whole of natural science" (*TLP*, 4.11; compare 6.53).

At this point, Lacan notes what many other commentators have duly remarked. This is what we might term Wittgenstein's own performative version of Russell's paradox of "the set of all sets that are not members of themselves" with which the young man had first come to Frege's, and thereby Russell's, attention. This is that the *TLP* sets out a system concerning how language can make sense which is unable to explain the truth value of *its own propositions*:

Everything I have said, he concludes at propositions 6.51, 2, 3, 4, since he numbers them, everything I have just stated is strictly speaking *Unsinn*, that is, it annuls sense.... What is at stake is that once the reader has passed through the long circuit of statements...he will have risen above everything that has just been said and concluded that nothing else is sayable—but that everything that can be said is only nonsense. (Lacan, 1991/2007, p. 59)

The status of both the logical laws which Wittgenstein tells us precondition the ability of language to make sense, and of his own book about the efficacy of these laws, is then paradoxically opaque. "The *logic* of the facts cannot be represented," Wittgenstein maintains (*TLP*, 4.0312; cf. also 4.461, 6.1, 6.11). For logical constants are not objects in the world that enable us to form true–false propositions. Hence, their philosophical description by Wittgenstein is likewise in this sense extramundane, neither true nor false: "(The word 'philosophy' must mean something which stands above or below, but not beside the natural sciences)" (*TLP*, 4.111). As we know, Wittgenstein will address this seemingly troubling paradox by introducing



the distinction between what can be spoken, and what can be “shown.” Philosophical language “says” nothing in the strict Wittgensteinian sense; but it is not for this reason “senseless” (*sinnlos*). Rather it is “nonsense,” *Unsinn* – that word (*Unsinn*) of such concern for Lacan insofar as he asks us to see in it what carries “the weight of existence” (Lacan, 1991/2007, p. 57). Such “nonsense” is still able to “show” what cannot be pictured – “the formal—logical—properties of language, of the world” – which for Wittgenstein can never *quite* be nothing (*TLP*, 6.12).²

It is this paradoxical exclusion of its own position of enunciation that we observe in the *TLP*, and Wittgenstein’s distance from Lacan’s conception of truth which becomes the fulcrum around which Lacan’s “para-diagnostic” critique of Wittgenstein turns. It is to this critique that we turn now.

Part 2: No Nonsense: Wittgenstein’s Psychotic Ferocity

The founding orientations of Lacan’s engagement with Wittgenstein are now apparent. By this period of the seminar, Lacan divides truth, which is not for him reducible to what can be said fully within any proposition, from knowledge, which is identifiable with such propositional claims, including the claims of the sciences. The latter, knowledge, is coded S_2 , and is one variable which changes places in his formulae of the four discourses. The former, truth, is a “place” in the grid of the discourses which always stays where it is. Visually, this place of truth is positioned in the bottom left, underneath the position of agency, as per Fig. 1.

Lacan is clear in Seminar XVII that “the true can only be found outside all propositions,” although not outside of all of the “effects of language,” given that the unconscious is what is at issue (Lacan, 1991/2007, p. 62). This position is “senseless” for the early Wittgenstein. Nevertheless, Lacan takes the rejection of the idea that “the false may imply the true” according to the laws of classical logic to be so far out of kilter with everything psychoanalysis teaches us about the efficacy of fantasy in “our entire life, I mean our life as a subject” to alone license the rejection of Wittgenstein’s idea that “truth could...be isolated as an attribute...of anything capable of articulating with knowledge” (Lacan, 1991/2007, p. 62).

On the basis of these fundamentally different orientations, however, Lacan develops a fierce, even ferocious criticism of Wittgenstein. Lacan attributes to Wittgenstein’s project “a psychotic ferocity, in comparison with which Ockham’s well-known razor, which states that we must admit only notions that are necessary, is nothing” (Lacan, 1991/2007, p. 62). To understand this criticism, we need now to trace the principal lines of Lacan’s criticism as he develops it across the session.

“When one says something there is no need to add that it is true,” we saw Lacan commenting above. The comment is ironic, ventriloquizing Wittgenstein (Lacan, 1991/2007, p. 56). For Lacan immediately goes on to register that, in the field of modern logic within which Wittgenstein is situated, this position is not unanimous. Frege in *Begriffsschrift* (“Concept Writing”) disagrees. For him, one should add an assertion sign (\vdash) “in front of sentences that are being asserted as true, as opposed to



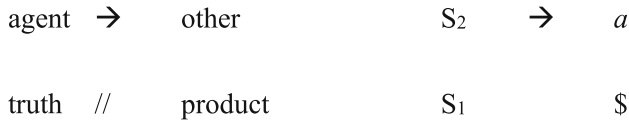


Figure 1 The places in the four discourses and (right) the discourse of the university.

sentences that are involved in some process of reasoning, but are not themselves put forward as true” (Blackburn, 2005, p. 26). The sign denotes the extra-linguistic fact that “it is asserted that”: “Mr Frege raises the question in the form of a horizontal stroke, and distinguishes it from how things are when one affirms that it is true, by putting a vertical stroke on the far left. Then it becomes an affirmation” (Lacan, 1991/2007, p. 56). As we know from Part 1, Wittgenstein in the *TLP* grants no place for anything like such an assertion sign. “It is in effect clear that it is defensible to say, and this is Wittgenstein’s position,” says Lacan, “that no sign of affirmation needs to be added to what is assertion pure and simple. An assertion declares itself to be the truth,” as far as Wittgenstein is concerned (Lacan, 1991/2007, p. 60). Or rather, what is true is set out or pictured in the elementary propositions, namely the atomic facts:

It is true that it is a fact, a fact constituted by my saying it, on those occasions when it’s true. But that it is true is not a fact, unless I explicitly add that, moreover, it’s true. It is just that, as Wittgenstein puts it very well, it’s quite superfluous for me to add it. (Lacan, 1991/2007, p. 60)

Nevertheless, as things turn out, since human beings are subjects of language and desire, they will always have some reason to assert even the most elementary propositions like “it is day.” One might for instance wish to teach students about Wittgenstein, or present a paper on his work for the consideration of one’s peers, and use this as an example of an elementary proposition. Outside of the classroom, Lacan more wryly suggests, one might venture any elementary proposition so as to pull the wool over the eyes of someone one hopes to deceive, “to get someone to believe that he can clearly see what my intentions are” in order to take advantage of his credulity (Lacan, 1991/2007, p. 61). Alongside the entire Wittgensteinian world of “facts,” and the crystalline, logically-interconnected true–false claims that form its cloudless mirror, there is for Lacan another, performative dimension of language. First of all, as per Part 1, it is the “language” of parapraxes, dreams, and slips which emerge in the clinic. Secondly, it is the world of all of the more mundane manifestations of human need, demand, and desire, as well as fidelity and duplicity.

There is no other metalanguage than all the forms of knavery, if we thereby designate these curious operations derivable from the fact that man’s desire is the Other’s desire. All acts of bastardry are based on the fact of wishing to be someone’s Other, I mean someone’s big Other, in which the figures by which his desire will be captivated are drawn. (Lacan, 1991/2007, p. 61)

So, Lacan is making a distinction here which overlaps with that which we registered above, between knowledge and truth. Here, the distinction is between the kind of



knowledgeable “fact-language” enshrined in Wittgenstein’s austere logicizing vision of the world, and the language in which speaking becomes the field for symbolic intersubjective relations as well as for the always only half-hidden play of desire. Clinical experience shows the way that knowledge, especially in the obsessional position, can be used precisely as a wall against the confrontation with the potentially traumatic register of desire, and the subject’s own aggression. The obsessional “lies,” relative to the truth of their own subject-position, by telling the “truth,” at the level of knowledge: they can even be the most obliging analysts imaginable, offering up impersonal knowledge to the analyst *ad infinitum* to avoid encountering the desire of the Other, and its attendant uncertainties and ambivalences.

Comparably, Lacan’s position allows us to hone in upon the fact that even someone committed to writing a book like the *TLP* will have their reasons, conscious and unconscious. The text itself, and its extraordinary architecture, bears witness to this desire. It is the desire to annul that register of language in which the truth of desire operates, so that here the “only truth is the truth of what the said desire for its lack hides, so as to make light of what he [Wittgenstein] does find” (Lacan, 1991/2007, p. 61). It is in fact this desire, at once obscure and “ferocious,” when we “feel its effects,” that provides that second reason animating Lacan’s interpretive desire to look at the *TLP* in Seminar XVII which we anticipated above.

In the university discourse, presented in the right half of Fig. 1, the S_1 of the undivided master holds the place of truth. The place of agency belongs to S_2 , signifying the positive bodies of knowledge that scholars produce. “From every academic statement by any philosophy whatsoever,” Lacan ventures, “the *I-crazy* emerges, irreducibly” (Lacan, 1991/2007, p. 63). Thus, “the myth of the ideal I, of the I that masters, of the I whereby at least something is identical to itself, namely the speaker,” is what the university discourse is “unable to eliminate” (Lacan, 1991/2007, p. 63). Lacan is seemingly pointing here to the continuing, subservient status of universities in service to the churches or states, which have from their beginning underwritten them in the West.³

What is decisive for us here is that Lacan contends that Wittgenstein is situated in relation to this discourse of the university in an oblique way. Philosophers generally are unwilling to acknowledge the lure of the figure of the master in their discourses. For them, as Lacan puts it, “the question has been a lot more supple and pathetic” as “what is in question, everyone acknowledges it more or less...[is that] they want to save truth” (Lacan, 1991/2007, p. 63). Yet, here is where things get interesting. For Lacan next claims that Wittgenstein took this philosophical desire so far (“good heavens, a long way”), by reducing truth to being “the rule and the foundation of knowledge” (Lacan, 1991/2007, p. 63). As a result, he continues, “there is nothing left to say, at least nothing that concerns truth as such, so as to refuse, to avoid, this rock” (Lacan, 1991/2007, p. 63). At this point, Lacan claims, Wittgenstein can no longer be located within the university discourse. Indeed, “surely the author has something close to the analyst’s position, namely, that he eliminates himself completely from his own discourse” (Lacan, 1991/2007, p. 63).

If we entertain this suggestion momentarily, we see that (see Fig. 2, and below) in the analytic discourse, knowledge is not in the position of agency. Rather, it is the



product of the operation whereby the *a*, that objectal remainder that falls out from discourse, calls into question the divided subject who does not know the truth of their own desire. What is in the place of truth is not the S_1 , but the knowledge (S_2) of the analyst.

Nevertheless, this is not Lacan's final assessment. Wittgenstein is no analyst *manqué*, although Lacan does take the time here to stress his unusual way of life relative to the English university, who made for him:

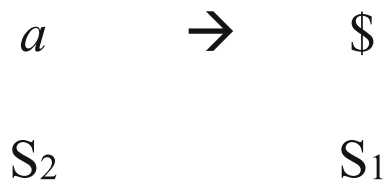
A place apart...a place of isolation with which the author went along with perfectly well himself, so much so that he withdrew from time to time to a little house in the country and then returned to pursue this implacable discourse. (Lacan, 1991/2007, p. 63)

"I mentioned psychosis before," Lacan reflects, referring back to his assessment of Wittgenstein's project of limiting sense to propositions which can be adjudged true or false as characterized by a "psychotic ferocity" (Lacan, 1991/2007, p. 62). And it is at this assessment, that there is something "strikingly suggestive of psychosis" about the *TLP*, "one of the most assured discourses," that Lacan ends with the younger Wittgenstein in Seminar XVII (Lacan, 1991/2007, p. 63). In seeming contradiction to the figure of the philosopher *per se* as described in preceding paragraphs, Lacan now makes his assertion that "Wittgenstein wasn't interested in saving the truth. Nothing can be said about truth, as he said" (Lacan, 1991/2007, p. 63). Two years later, in Seminar XIX, he would repeat the diagnosis: "Throughout his whole life, with admirable asceticism, Wittgenstein stated the following, which I'm condensing – *whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent*. In view of which he would hardly say anything at all" (Lacan, 2011/2018, p. 72).

Why then does this evoke psychosis? Lacan continues in Seminar XVII, by asking and answering his own rhetorical question: "But how, then, does Freud define the psychotic position in a letter I have quoted many times? Precisely, by what he calls, strangely, *un glauben*, not wanting to know anything about the spot where truth is in question" (Lacan, 1991/2007, p. 63). It is difficult for readers to know what to make of this, given that Lacan characteristically does not dot all the i's, moving on immediately to a consideration of Georges Politzer's "Foundations of Concrete Psychology." We venture the following interpretation.

Wittgenstein himself clearly registers the paradoxical status of the impossibility of his own subject-position being included in the world the *TLP* posits. Thus, 5.632 famously reads, "the subject does not belong to the world but it is a limit of the world," followed by:

Figure 2 The analyst's discourse.



Where in the world is a metaphysical subject to be noted? You say that this case is altogether like that of the eye and the field of sight. You do not really see the eye. And from nothing in the field of sight can it be concluded that it is seen from an eye. (TLP, 5.633)

The world of the *TLP*, as Derek Jarman's 1993 film *Wittgenstein* captures, is hence characterized by the most perfect alienation. It is a world wherein there are no subjects; indeed, "no alarms and no surprises," to echo the popular song. Given that psychosis is at issue, the reader can indeed refer back here to Lacan's early seminar on the Schreber case, Seminar III, to gain perspective on this extraordinary a-subjective *denouement*.

In several sessions there, Lacan looks at the linguistic deformations that characterize the world of the psychotic, given their foreclosure of the paternal signifier.⁴ Lacan notes that the psychotic has especial difficulties with all of those speech-acts which later analytic philosophy would designate as "performatives," and which, as such, do not function like Wittgensteinian true-false propositions about states of affairs in the world (Lacan, 1981/1993, pp. 271–284, 295–309). The symbolic invocation "you are the one who will follow me," for the psychotic, does not evoke the mediating presence of a big Other who will witness and certify this call for the would-be disciple to voluntarily pledge himself to the cause at issue – a *symbolic* pledge that he may, precisely as a *subject*, also fail to live up to. Instead, to use modern logical terminology, he hears this in the register of a sinister prediction about some future, predetermined state of affairs, akin to the fatal letters of the Theban oracle which condemned Oedipus in advance: "there is an x (you/the ego) such that, at some future time (y), s/he will be following me...."

Wittgenstein does not seem to have worried himself about the problem of "future contingents." This is the problem of whether a proposition like this psychotic "you will be the one who, at some future time, will be following me" (Aristotle's famous example is "there will be a sea battle tomorrow") can be presently considered true or false. Wittgenstein we know is committed to the supposition that any proposition has to be true or false, in contrast to Aristotle (*De Interpretatione*, chapter 9). Otherwise, it will be senseless, if not nonsense. Yet, Aristotle maintained that the disjunction "either there will or will not be a sea battle tomorrow" is *itself* true, since one or other of its disjuncts must necessarily, given time, prove to be the case. And given Wittgenstein's account of elementary propositions, this option is unavailable to him.

It is anyway clear that, if a subject *qua* subject is made aware of some "minority report" prediction concerning his future ("tomorrow you will follow me"), this fact by itself makes it possible for them, on the basis of this "knowledge," to do everything they can to change the future predicted in this proposition.⁵ But we have seen that there are no subjects within Wittgenstein's world of facts and states of affairs, even if this world is not yet populated by anything like Schreber's fleeting-improvised men (see Lucas, 2003).

But perhaps this is why there is an inescapable sadness about the vision Wittgenstein eventually hits upon in the *TLP*. The language that makes sense, he laments, can express nothing of "what is higher" (*TLP*, 6.432): it is surely with such



statements in mind that Lacan underscores how, for the Austrian philosopher, language can say nothing about the dimension in which the truth is at stake. “The sense of the world must lie outside of the world,” Wittgenstein muses:

In the world everything is as it is and everything happens as it does happen. *In* it there is no value.... For all happening and being-so is accidental. What makes it non-accidental cannot lie *in* the world.... It must lie outside the world. (*TLP*, 6.41)

One can know ever so much of this world. But there will always be something fundamental missing. So desire inescapably points elsewhere, anywhere else (see *TLP*, 6.52). Nothing with sense can be said of what lies beyond this world, even though Wittgenstein realizes that this includes the most pressing facts of our subjective existences, and the entire subject matter of what he terms ethics. Lacan returns to consider the young Wittgenstein's strange *denouement* in Seminar XIX in the context of reflections on the *objet petit a*, precisely as a residue which eludes the world of impersonal facts, but which is intimately bound up with the “problems of life.” To the extent that every object that the Other offers the subject isn't *that* which they desire (“*this isn't it*”), says Lacan, then “it seems to me, [that] what one cannot speak about” in Wittgenstein's system is at stake here (Lacan, 2011/2018, p. 72). There is something extra-objectal to every material object which enters the subjective pathway, the field of desire, not captured in language.

All such considerations and the subjective itself become “mystical” for Wittgenstein, Lacan registers. But this is a striking explosion of the sense of this religious signifier, which now includes not only ethics, but almost everything that the human or social sciences investigate, and a good deal of everyday discourse about which there seems to be nothing meaningfully ineffable. The Shabbat-like proposition 7 with which the *TLP* ends, and which Lacan is evoking in Seminar XIX, is “whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.” But even this Wittgensteinian statement involves a subject-effacing performative contradiction.

Part 3: Concluding Remarks

In his examination of the commonalities and divergences between Lacan and Wittgenstein, Paul Livingston (2018, pp. 257–258) concludes that the silence advocated by Wittgenstein at the conclusion of the *TLP* is recognized by both thinkers as not the only “way out,” or way forwards. For Lacan instead, it is “the (incomplete) totality of language itself” which makes us “recognize the inseparability of truth from the effects of language,” while nevertheless articulating the possibility of the connection of truth to a “being that speaks” (Livingston, 2018, pp. 257–258). As for Wittgenstein, the “psychotic” position which Lacan in Seminar XVII suggests that the philosopher gives voice to in the *TLP* is predicated on the absolute certainty of pure logical formalization. If we recall Lacan's description of the psychotic state from Seminar III, we appreciate that “the world” for the psychotic subject, “as you will see emerge in the subject's discourse,” is wholly “transformed into what we call a fantasmagoria, but which for him has the



utmost certainty in his lived experience” (Lacan, 1981/1993, p. 69). Wittgenstein (1969) indeed turned to this question of certainty following his two great works. By the time of the *PI*, we famously see the nearly complete shift in Wittgenstein’s basic conception of language. Wittgenstein even differentiates between his current and previous selves in the later text (at *PI*, #23). The style too has altered, between the axiomatic declarative statements of the *TLP*, wherein he had “to his mind, solved all philosophical problems” (Biletzki & Matar, 2021) and the aphorisms of the *PI*, which trace the “countless...language-games” which continually “come into existence” (*PI*, #23), but none of which is absolutely privileged.

What then are we to make of Lacan’s diagnosis of something psychotic about the world vision articulated in one of the most influential works of philosophy of the twentieth century? Does this not represent one of the most striking exemplifications of psychoanalytic overreach, and the psychologizing extension of psychobiography into a field, philosophy, wherein it has no place, beyond to exemplify the “genetic fallacy”? Here in fact, as in Lacan’s treatment of literature (see Rabaté, 2001), what the text of Seminar XVII underscores is the extent to which Lacan’s structuralist refiguring of psychoanalysis moves us away from the psychobiographical paradigm. In only one sentence does Lacan mention Wittgenstein’s extensively documented biographical eccentricities, which could tempt the lay analyst to a psychotic diagnosis. Lacan’s analysis, as we have seen, instead concerns the signifiers of *TLP*, and an analysis of the claims they make concerning the relationship between language and the world, knowledge and truth. As we might put it, Lacan’s claim is that the vision of the world laid out in the *TLP* is “objectively” psychotic, or that it gives form to a psychotic conception of language. Any subject who tried to live “in the real world,” speaking only Wittgensteinian elementary or complex propositions, would resemble a madman, utterly closed to all humane reflection upon what Wittgenstein mourns as “the problems of life” (*TLP*, 6.52). Nevertheless, one does not need to make any psychobiographical assertions concerning Wittgenstein the man to ground these claims: everything transpires at the level of an analysis of the text of *TLP* itself.

We close by raising that third reason for Lacan’s interest in Wittgenstein that we have now severally evoked (alongside the attempt to highlight his own position by contrast [Part 1], and to diagnose the *TLP* as meaningfully psychotic [Part 2]). The effacement of his own subjectivity, and hence of the dimension of truth at stake in psychoanalysis which Lacan stresses in the *TLP*, is uncannily close to the subject-position of the psychoanalyst himself, as we saw Lacan commenting in Part 2. It is around the discourse of the analyst that the session “Truth, the Sister of *Jouissance*” turns. One can surely wish to have heard more from Lacan on this enigmatic *rapprochement* between seeming opposites, the madman and the clinician, the younger Wittgenstein and the psychoanalyst, since it is clearly not an identification of the two which is at issue. Minimally, we can say that what Lacan’s session suggests is that there is more than one way to “eliminate [oneself] completely from [their] own discourse” (Lacan, 1991/2007, p. 63). The psychotic does this in such a way that the dimension of subjective truth is foreclosed, so only facts and states of affairs remain. For the analyst, by contrast, one could even say that the place of the subject within the discourse of the analysand, as it is presented in their free



associations, is everything that matters. And eliciting this elusive truth from the analysand, rather than hypostasizing it as “mystical,” is the justification for the analyst assuming the place of the *objet petit a* in the clinic, eliminating themselves as subject so as to become the object-cause of the analysand's desire.

Lacan's Wittgenstein, we thus see, echoes at a much greater level of sophistication some of Freud's grimmer assessments of the connection between philosophy and “overestimating the objective value of logical operations” (Thomas Mann's assessment of Freud [in Lear, 1990, p. 1]; see also Sharpe and Faulkner, 2008, pp. 4–5), a trait which it shares with psychosis (Freud, 1914/1957, pp. 74–81).

Such an assessment suggests a narcissistic dimension to philosophical activities, which evokes both Lacan's continuing opposition to the clinical and conceptual bases of ego psychology, as well as his own positioning as an anti-philosopher (cf. Regnault, 1997; Sharpe, 2019).

Perhaps the assessment of Wittgenstein should be read, then, as one more document in Lacan's increasingly open declarations of his anti-philosophical stance, in the tradition of his earlier critiques of Sartre and Hegel, but also the metaphysics of Plato and Parmenides, to whose work he nevertheless owes avowed debts. With that said, and to return to our opening provocation here, Jacques Derrida's own qualms with Lacan, first discussed in a footnote to an interview given in 1971 (cf. Derrida, 1972/1981) – in some ways reflecting Lacan's qualms regarding Wittgenstein – begin with Lacan's *own* systematicity (however much he, and his followers, may reject this term), in a recourse to metaphysics (via Hegelian and Heideggerean conceptuality) specifically surrounding “the identification of truth (as unveiling) and speech (logos)” and the related question of metalanguage (Derrida, 1972/1981, p. 111).⁶ One can hardly miss, and one must always remember, that Lacan nevertheless remains the most philosophically sophisticated, as well as the most philosophically influential, of the analysts.

Notes

1. Élisabeth Rigal-Granel (2013) draws attention to this subject in Lacan's work as well as the in-existent “thinking, presenting subject” (at 5.631) in the *TLP*.
2. See Breitenbach (2008, p. 55, p. 58).
3. Probably, philosophers' continuing attraction to forms of rule by a master at whose disposal they place their knowledge is intended. See Jean-Claude Milner (1995).
4. Fascinatingly, “what is at issue in foreclosure,” per Seminar XIX, is that “*something may or may not be said*” (Lacan, 2011/2018, p. 14).
5. See Sharpe (2005). The redoubled paradox comes, as in *Oedipus Rex*, when it is only the attempts to escape the oracular prediction which enable it to become true.
6. Namely, while comparing Lacan's statement that “there is no metalanguage,” with his own “there is nothing outside the text,” Derrida questions whether Lacan's propositions on truth remain on a Heideggerean continuum of veiling/



unveiling, stating that “the most classical metaphysics and onto-theology can quite well accommodate metalanguage” (Derrida, 1972/1981, p. 111). Derrida, and those inspired by his work, such as Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe (1973/1992), would pursue this inquiry in some of the most well-known critiques of Lacan’s work (cf. Derrida, 1980; on an assessment of their positions, see Johnson, 1977).

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by CAUL and its Member Institutions.

Author statement On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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