

# I Think Therefore I Am Not *Mystical Desire and the Dispossession of the Cogito*

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## ABSTRACT

This article sets out to question the understanding of religion as a purely spiritual relationship with God by focusing on the mystical experience of ecstasy, an experience that has often been described as leaving the body behind in a moment of spiritual rapture. Using psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's work, this article will set out to show that it is not the body that is left behind in mystical ecstasy, but rather a certain understanding of selfhood constituted by autonomous reason that will come to be conceptualized as the Cartesian *cogito*. The body figures as the site of an unknown that accepts having been constituted by another unknown, a God that cannot be sublated or grasped by reason alone. In this sense, the goal of psychoanalysis will be shown to overlap with an apophatic and embodied relation to the divine.

## KEYWORDS

embodiment; mysticism; psychoanalysis, Jacques Lacan; the Cartesian *cogito*; desire; *jouissance*.

*'The psyche is extended.'*  
Freud<sup>1</sup>

The opening paragraph of the ESPR call for papers for the Embodied Religion Conference spoke indiscriminately of all religions as, and I quote, 'belonging to the sphere of the spiritual, since for most religious traditions (Christian as well as non-Christian) God is a spiritual being and relates to humankind spiritually.' By positing such a separation between the spiritual and the material, the soul and the body, this description reiterates a longstanding dualist tradition that separates the spiritual and the material, the transcendent and the immanent, placing religion on the side of the spirit, where it has traditionally been accompanied by God, man, reason and heaven, thereby relegating the immanent and embodied to a lesser sphere where it has found the company of women, the passions and hell.<sup>2</sup> The conference description then goes on to describe the ways in which these religious traditions nonetheless come down to earth to deal with embodied issues. Here, a list of a variety of these embodied religious practices are given, dealing with rituals related to sexuality and reproduction, eating, propitiation and sacrifice, birth and death, art and liturgy, sacraments and asceticism. Yet one wonders, after reading the list of embodied practices of religion, what a list of 'spiritual practices' might look like?<sup>3</sup> Though Christianity is an orthodox religion, giving central importance to creed, both of the other monotheisms, to name just those, are orthopraxes, giving central importance to ritual practice. But even in the case of Christianity, is not belief, is not faith, always instantiated in a way of life (in certain political and ethical choices, in a gaze, a way of speaking) and inseparable from that embodied life? Are not prayer, rituals, sacrifices and forms of asceticism also spiritual practices?

In fact, notwithstanding its orthodoxy, embodiment is perhaps the most defining characteristic of Christianity, the very trait that sets it apart from all other religions. Christianity differs from other monotheisms by believing in a

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<sup>1</sup> This phrase was published as a posthumous note. Cited in Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus* (Paris 2006), 22.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed description of how women used their association with the lesser part, that of embodiment, frailty, humanity, to identify with Christ, see Caroline Walker Bynum's wonderful book, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley 1988).

<sup>3</sup> It is easier to understand the role of the spiritual in certain Indian traditions, notably Advaita Vedanta, which posits consciousness as outside the individual, and outside the mind. Consciousness is thus disembodied.

God who is at the same time man, who suffered, ate and slept, in a body, who was born, died, and resurrected in and as a body. Though many traditions believe in anthropomorphic gods, who live embodied lives, they are normally endowed with immortality, and placed in a realm outside of human contingency. Hence, amongst all religions, Christianity is set apart precisely due to its embodied God, who did not escape from human contingency, who was misunderstood and left to die at a particular time, as one among many prisoners in the Roman colony of Jerusalem in the first century. Jesus Christ thus places Christianity in a special relationship to embodiment, one that has a unique claim to the suffering and joys of the flesh, setting it apart from the Greek condemnation of the flesh, as well as from the many rival forms of Christianity that attempted to interpret Christ's body as an illusion, or to place Christ lower than God the Father in the divine hierarchy, precisely because he was born into time and hence not understood as being eternal.<sup>4</sup> Showing that the transcendent is embodied in the here and now of contingent existence, the being here of what is beyond, the Incarnation is certainly Christianity's most distinctive trait. The novelty of this event in the history of religions is brought home by Jesuit historian of religions Michel de Certeau in an interview he gave to France Culture. I quote:

Something, in my opinion, can be found at the center of a Christian faith, which can be called, in Christian jargon, the incarnation, in other words, the fact that God is man. I would say that with this idea there is a fundamental rupture in relation to the ways in which God was represented as a sun, as something or someone somewhere who escaped from contingency, from history, from death, from the avatars of circumstance. What Christianity brought with this idea that God is man, is the fact that he is but a person in history named Jesus, it is the bursting of the sun. This sun is stained and dispersed in a thousand pieces in the accident of daily life [le quotidien]. At bottom, God is the stained sun, is the stain in the sun. If we can look for God somewhere, it is not in a paradise, in a cloud or in an exteriority in respect to history, but on the contrary in everyday human relations.<sup>5</sup>

So, to come back to our question, what might a purely spiritual event look like in the Christian tradition? Mystical experiences immediately come to mind, as a place where we might find a means of bypassing the mediated word of Scripture for an immediate and direct spiritual communication with

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<sup>4</sup> I am thinking here of Arianism, Docetism and Monophysitism in particular.

<sup>5</sup> France Inter, 19 December, 1975, in: F. Dosse, *Michel de Certeau: Le marcheur béni* (Paris 2002), 462 (translations here and in the rest of the text are my own unless otherwise noted).

a risen Christ. This is indeed the way mystical experience is described by many mystics themselves, and one of the primary reasons for the persecution of many of these mystics by the Church, as they stood directly under God's authority, rather than that of the Pope and his interpretation of Scripture.

During the phase of apologetic, perennial philosophy of religion epitomized by Rudolf Otto, Aldous Huxley, Evelyn Underhill, William James and Mircea Eliade, this is often the interpretation given to mystical experience, and particularly mystical ecstasy (from *ec-stasis*, to stand outside) which came to be seen as a universal and direct experience of transpersonal union with the divine that transcended religious differences and particular embodied practices.<sup>6</sup> Though this approach is still defended, especially among professors schooled by Eliade, much scholarship has been done deflating such a universal and disembodied interpretation of mystical experience.<sup>7</sup> But if recent interpretations of mysticism convincingly refute these perennial claims, what, we might ask, does the mystic transcend, when she speaks of herself as outside herself in ecstasy, if it is not her body?

Examples of Christian mystics describing ecstasy as an event at which they were absent abound. Mechthild Von Magdeburg gives an excellent example of becoming absent to herself by describing her soul in union with Christ in the third person voice: 'Then a blessed stillness/ That both desire comes over them./ He surrenders himself to her,/ And she surrenders herself to him./ What happens to her then – she knows –/ And that is fine with me.'<sup>8</sup> Who is this knowing 'she,' and this unknowing 'me?' Hadewijch similarly writes: 'It weighs me down that I cannot obtain/ knowledge of Love without renouncing self'; and again: 'After that I remained in a passing away in my Beloved, so that I wholly melted away in him and nothing any longer remained to me of myself.'<sup>9</sup> John of the Cross similarly describes abandoning himself in order to experience his Beloved: 'I abandoned and forgot myself/ laying my face on my beloved; All things ceased; I went out from myself, / Leaving my cares Forgotten among the lilies.'<sup>10</sup> All of these passages describe the experience of a divided self, where a knowing narrative self is abandoned by an unknowing self who melts away in God. The 'I' who narrates the expe-

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<sup>6</sup> More recent scholars who defend this position include Walter Stace, and Robert Forman.

<sup>7</sup> Steven J. Katz, Wayne Proudfoot, Richard King and Russell McCutcheon are good examples here.

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Mechthild von Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* (NY 1997), 61–62.

<sup>9</sup> Cited in Hadewijch, *The Complete Works* (NY 1981), 187 and 280–282.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in John of the Cross, *Selected Writings* (NY 1988), 55–56.

rience remains behind, below, and is not able to take part in an experience of which it 'knows nothing.' If the conscious knowing self is left behind, who is the subject of this unknowing ecstasy, and how are we to understand its relationship to the embodied self?

I would like to venture a reply to this question by looking at the work of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, focusing particularly on his *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* and his Seminar XX, 'Encore.' By choosing to call the experience of ecstasy by the French term 'jouissance,' which simultaneously connotes both joy and intense physical pleasure, Lacan stands firmly in the postmodern camp, understanding mystical ecstasy as an embodied and contingent spatio-temporal experience. As he puts it in Seminar XX, 'Encore,' 'for jouissance to occur, there has to be a body.'<sup>11</sup> I will use the *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* to provide an interpretation of his Seminar XX on mysticism, interpreting Lacan as showing that it is a form of reason, which sees itself as autonomous and self-supporting, that is transcended during moments of mystical *jouissance*, when the mystic accepts having been constituted by an Other beyond her understanding, and beyond her control. Identifying the self with a vulnerable and embodied desire for a vulnerable and embodied God, the mystic abandons the inviolability of the ego and its sublation of the other, and opens herself to an encounter with the other in its own terms. Lacan, this paper will argue, uses mystical subjectivity as a tool in order to reveal the untenability of Descartes' *cogito*,<sup>12</sup> thereby undermining the modern construction of an autonomous subject. It is thus in the mystical tradition that Lacan will find the model for an embodied subject who, by abandoning the 'all,' the 'whole,' for what he calls the 'not all,' opens herself to an Other, who, instead of mirroring and thereby reinforcing the ego, un-

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<sup>11</sup> Jacques-Alain Miller (ed.), *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XX: Encore* (NY 1998), 26.

<sup>12</sup> Although the modern subject, characterized by autonomous and rational self-representation, can be traced to a visual source in the mechanization of vision and Brunelleschi's invention of artificial perspective, it remains the case that many postmodern thinkers, including Heidegger and Jacques Lacan, used Descartes as a foundational example of this modern and reflexive subject, though he is of course merely emblematic of a shift that can be attributed to no single person. As Charles Winquist puts it in his article 'Person': 'There is no one event or thinker that can be definitively identified with an epochal epistemic shift in a culture. However, it is convenient to read Descartes' *Meditations on the First Philosophy* as synecdochically emblematic of the epistemic shift initiating the Age of Reason. The heuristic use of radical doubt to clear away any uncertainties was, as Descartes suggested, a removal from below of the foundation of the whole edifice of thinking and believing.' Cited in Mark Taylor (ed.), *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago 1998), 227. One of the unfortunate results of this shift, most evident in Descartes, is the Manichaeian divide between mind and body that has plagued the Christian West.

ravels it. Mirroring the unknowability of God, the body will be understood as the site of the unconscious, a site that remains always alien, always unknown.<sup>13</sup>

By placing Lacan's critique of Descartes in his *Four Fundamental Concepts* alongside his celebration of mystical *jouissance* in 'Encore,' I am not making an ahistorical claim that the *cogito* was somehow already constitutive of medieval subjectivity. Rather I am using Lacan to show how Descartes' *cogito* can be understood as a defence mechanism, which actually resembles in interesting ways the foundation of the ego in the psychological development of the child. In this sense, the experience of ecstasy as described by medieval mystics coincides with Lacan's understanding of the Real, as an experience of ex-istence, beyond language and the symbolic constitution of the self as subject. The *cogito*, one might say, develops as a natural defence of the subject against this Real, which is beyond our cognitive understanding, and hence a source of anxiety. According to Lacan's analysis, only certain apophatic mystics, then and now (and Lacan would include himself here), can accept this unknown as the very nature of the embodied self.

#### 1. THROUGH A GLASS, DARKLY

Descartes has become emblematic of a certain reflexive subject who is constituted through his own rational thought and hence understood as somehow independent of the world and the people in it.<sup>14</sup> And like Descartes, many of us choose to understand ourselves as somehow whole and independent, self-created through the activity of our own autonomous reason. As phenomenologist and Catholic theologian Jean-Luc Marion has pointed out, this hubris can lead to the positing of an Other who comes to function as an idolatrous mirror, guaranteeing our individuality, our fictive wholeness and

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<sup>13</sup> It is important here to differentiate Lacan's analysis of the body as constituted in the imaginary and symbolic phase, where it is a cultural construction, rather than something we are born with, from the body as the Real, the organism that is the site of *jouissance*, separate from the subject and its constructed identity.

<sup>14</sup> In his third meditation, Descartes expresses himself as follows: 'I am a thinking (conscious) thing, that is, a being who doubts, affirms, denies, knows a few objects, and is ignorant of many, - [who loves, hates], wills, refuses, - who imagines likewise, and perceives; for, as I before remarked, although the things which I perceive or imagine are perhaps nothing at all apart from me, I am nevertheless assured that those modes of consciousness which I call perceptions and imaginations, in as far only as they are modes of consciousness, exist in me.' Descartes, (Meditations, III, pg. 119) cited in *The Rationalists* (NY, 1960), 128.

autonomy as real. Marion describes this mirror as a prison, locking the subject in a world inhabited exclusively by his own reflection:

Man becomes obsessed when he can see only images modelled on himself; from constantly seeing without being seen he can finally only see images that mirror his unique gaze. The obsidian obscenity of a universe of idols can tolerate no exit, since the gaze will always and only reproduce its idols.<sup>15</sup>

Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan has explained how the function of this invisible mirror develops during childhood when an actual and visible mirror leads the subject to identify itself with its mirror image, thereby limiting its identity to a visible appearance which saturates the gaze with an illusory unity. Lacan calls this reflection the ego. This interface between seeing oneself seeing and ego formation is described by Lacan as constituting the subject. He describes what he calls a mirror stage, when a young child (between six and eighteen months) first recognizes a mirror reflection as representing itself. When this recognition occurs, a disjointed identity, characterized by undisciplined motor functions, is replaced by a 'proper body,' a *gestalt*, a whole that the gaze appropriates as itself in its encounter with its mirror reflection. Because the mirror reflection lies outside the self, the 'I' as well is alien or other, constituting the subject as self-different, split. Michel de Certeau comments as follows:

Though the child has only dispersed, successive and mobile corporeal experiences, he receives from the mirror the image that makes him *one*, but according to a *fiction*. With a 'jubilatory activity' [affairement], he discovers that he is *one* (primordial form of the *I*), but by means of an alienation that identifies him with this thing that is *other* than him (a mirror image). The experience could be called: *I am that*. The *I* is formed only at the price of alienation. Its capture begins with its birth... From the start, it installs the *I* as 'discordance of the subject with its own reality,' and it calls forth the work of the negative ('It is not that') by means of which the subject closes itself within the lie of its identity ('I am that').<sup>16</sup>

The mirror closes the subject within the lie of its unicity. Seeing itself as other to itself, the subject effaces its own self-difference, its own relationality. This identification with the fiction of the mirror thus creates an alienated subject, who arms himself with the specter of unity, thereby giving rise to the

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<sup>15</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, 'Le prototype de l'image,' in François Boesflug & Nicolas Lossky (eds.), *Nicée II 787-1987: Douze siècles d'images religieuses* (Paris 1987), 465.

<sup>16</sup> Michel de Certeau, *Histoire et psychanalyse: entre science et fiction*, (Paris 1987), 223-224.

unconscious as the memory of its fragmented embodied nature, its lack of singularity. Lacan writes:

The mirror stage is a drama... that machinates the phantasms that replace [se succèdent] a fragmented image of the body with a form that we will call orthopedic of its totality, and with the finally assumed armor of an alienating identity...<sup>17</sup>

In the mirror reflection, the 'I' is thus already constituted as 'ideal I' and thus already as ego:

This form situates the instance of the *ego* [moi], even before its social determination, in a line of fiction that is forever irreducible for the individual alone.<sup>18</sup>

It is the ego as an illusion or fiction of undivided totality that experiences a solitary exultation in recognizing itself as the independent object it has cathected. Caught in the *mise-en-abyme* of the mirror, self-consciousness is imprisoned in an identity that is 'whole,' 'one,' and 'autonomously constituted,' forcing it to suppress its own lived experience of embodiment as unknowable, vulnerable and constituted by alterity. The unconscious, we could say, is the lived experience of the body, both intimate and alien, one's own, yet constantly eluding the conscious mind and its constitution of itself as subject, as ego. This Real is lost to consciousness when the child enters into the symbolic, but returns in moments of trauma and moments of *jouissance*, experiences that exist in the realm of non-meaning, where they remain stranded, outside of language and cognition.

This need to be 'all,' to enframe the self as a controllable image attests to what Lacan calls, in psychoanalytic jargon, 'the phallic function,' understood as the need to appropriate, label and hence control 'that obscure object of desire' to ensure that it reflects back to us our autonomous and inflated ego. This other who is transformed into a mirror, can be God (and more often than not the signifier 'God' seems to take on this function), just as it can be Woman, who reflects his maleness back to man, his self-esteem. Phallic *jouissance* thus reduces the other to an object that is imputed with causation, with having caused our desire (Lacan calls this object *objet petit a*).<sup>19</sup>

As Bernard of Clairvaux told us long ago in his sermon 'On Loving God,' because our desire is infinite, it can never find satisfaction in a finite object of desire. Similarly, for psychoanalysis, and I quote, 'phallic *jouissance* is the

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<sup>17</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits* (Paris 1966), 96.

<sup>18</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits*, *ibidem*.

<sup>19</sup> According to metonymy, *objet petit a* can be cathected as a breast or penis for instance.



jouissance that fails us, that disappoints us... it always leaves something more to be desired...<sup>20</sup> Moving beyond phallic jouissance, then, would leave the subject facing an infinite unknown that cannot be reified or sublated.<sup>21</sup> The name that Lacan gives to this unknown is ‘the obscure God,’ thereby identifying an apophatic experience of the divine with the end of the subject’s alienation from her own embodied nature.

## 2. THE OBSCURE GOD

In his *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan provides his critique of the autonomous Cartesian *cogito* in order to elucidate his central claim that the self is constituted by and as this unknown alterity. Just as Eckhart calls for God to think in and for man, so Descartes, according to Lacan, founded his thought outside himself by turning to a *malin génie*. Thus his *I think therefore I am* cannot fulfill its intended self-sufficient autonomy, for its negation of the world, of the body and of others is at the mercy of his *malin génie*’s whim. Even the fact that he is certain, that is, that he has a clear and distinct idea that he is doubting and therefore that he is a thinking thing, has a cause exterior to his thought.<sup>22</sup> This cause, because it cannot be overridden, fulfills Descartes’ idea of God, and as such destroys it, for as infinite and perfect signifier of truth, its role can no longer be distinguished from that of the *malin génie*, for both can manipulate the real. According to this reading, Descartes’ other is neither clear nor distinct, and though he cannot think it, it necessarily thinks him. In letting the *génie* possess his interiority, Descartes is unwittingly saying that only the other can think for him, and thus that he doesn’t think (‘je ne pense pas’). Jean-Luc Marion’s extensive exegesis of Descartes is in fundamental agreement with Lacan, leading him to refer to the *cogito* as being constituted *a-posteriori*, as a *res cogitans cogitate*. Using Descartes’ thought experiment, which begins with the *cogito* being thought

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<sup>20</sup> Bruce Fink, ‘Knowledge and Jouissance,’ in: Bruce Fink & Suzanne Bernard (eds.), *Reading Seminar XX* (NJ 2002), 37.

<sup>21</sup> Roland Barthes describes this unknown other quite well in the secular context of love: ‘...That the other is not to be known; his opacity is not a screen around a secret, but instead, reality and appearance is done away with. I am then seized with that exaltation of loving *someone unknown*, someone who will remain so forever: a mystic impulse.’ *Fragments d’un discours amoureux* (Paris 1977), 42.

<sup>22</sup> ‘For how could I know that I doubt, desire or that something is wanting to me, and I am not wholly perfect, if I possessed no idea of a being more perfect than myself, by comparison of which I know the deficiencies of my nature?’ Descartes (*Meditations III*) cited in *The Rationalists*, 137.

(whether by the evil genius or by God changes little), and thinking only as a response, Marion describes the subject as fundamentally delayed, always arriving late to the event of its own constitution.<sup>23</sup> Descartes' supposedly solitary and self-sufficient subject is thus able to think itself only relationally, to a transcendent Other.<sup>24</sup> Thus for Lacan, Descartes' *I think therefore I am* deconstructs itself in two important ways. Since the two I's it cites cannot be grounded in a united subject, Lacan dissociates the infamous conjunctive 'therefore' from the ontological clause that follows it, replacing it with what he calls the *vel*, the 'or' that separates the two clauses and reveals the subject to be fundamentally split (subject = \$).<sup>25</sup> 'I think or I am,' we could say, or 'I think therefore I am not,' or even '*I am because the other thinks me.*' According to psychoanalyst Gerard Miller, the Lacanian question thus becomes 'what am I in the desire of the Other?'<sup>26</sup> The answer, for Lacan, is given in his famous and oft-repeated phrase 'le désir de l'homme c'est le désir de l'autre,' which can be rendered: 'Man's desire is the desire of/for the other [...] which is to say that it is as the Other that he desires.'<sup>27</sup> Saint Francis could not have agreed more, for it was what Bonaventure called his 'burning desire' that led him to an identification with Christ such that Christ desired and suffered in him, as him.

In infinitely desiring an infinite Other, the mystic desires an apophatic God from the site of its own apophatic unknowing: the body. Lacan calls this unknown other who cannot be reduced to a mirror image, 'the obscure God,' thereby using the apophatic tradition to illustrate a relation to the Other be-

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<sup>23</sup> 'I am insofar as originally thought by another thought [pensé par une autre pensée] that always already thinks me, even if I cannot yet identify its essence or prove its existence. I am already a *res cogitans*, but only understood as a thought that someone else thinks, a thinking thought thought by another thinking thought – *res cogitans cogitata*... The first thought of the *ego* is, in fact, not about an object (certain or false), nor about itself, but about the thought by means of which another (or even an alterity [voire un autrui]) thinks it (persuades or fools it). The *ego* is thus instituted as originally a *posteriori*.' Jean-Luc Marion, *Etant donné: Essai d'une phénoménologie de la donation* (Paris 2005), 378–379. Marion discusses this more specifically in his article 'The Original Otherness of the *Ego*: A Rereading of Descartes's *Meditatio II*,' in: E. Wyschogrod & G. McKenny (eds.), *The Ethical* (Oxford 2003), 33–53.

<sup>24</sup> 'We can say that if we ignore God, we can have certain knowledge of no other thing.' Descartes, *Principes I*, 13, cited in Jean-Marie Beyssade, 'Descartes,' in: Francois Chatelet (ed.), *La philosophie du monde nouveau* (Paris 1972), 108.

<sup>25</sup> This split subject, according to psychoanalyst Bruce Fink, 'consists entirely in the fact a speaking being's two 'parts' or avatars share no common ground: they are radically separated (the *ego* requiring a refusal of unconscious thoughts, unconscious thought having no concern whatsoever for the *ego*'s fine opinion of itself).' Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject* (Princeton 1995), 45.

<sup>26</sup> Gerard Miller, *Lacan* (Paris 1987), 29.

<sup>27</sup> Anika Lemaire, *Jacques Lacan* (Bruxelles 1977), 261.

yond the caption of the thinking self. I quote from his *Four Concepts of Psychoanalysis*: ‘...in the object of our desires, we try to find the witness of the presence of the desire of that Other that I will here call the obscure God.’<sup>28</sup>

In seminar XX, ‘Encore,’ Lacan clarifies how the subject is constituted by the desire of this obscure God, explicitly placing his own work among the classics of the mystical canon, and thereby equating the goal of psychoanalysis and mysticism. He writes:

These mystical ejaculations are neither idle gossip nor mere verbiage, in fact they are the best thing you can read – note right at the bottom of the page, add the *Ecrits* of Jacques Lacan, which is of the same order.<sup>29</sup>

Lacan’s argument centers on replacing phallic *jouissance* with what he calls a ‘supplementary *jouissance*,’ which can be experienced only when one stands on the side of the ‘not all.’<sup>30</sup> He identifies this ‘supplementary *jouissance*’ as the goal of psychoanalysis, in that it acknowledges that we are founded by an Other that we cannot possess and know. The mystico-psychoanalytic cure can occur only when, rather than obscuring this obscure origin, we can achieve *jouissance* by means of it, accept it as our origin and our destination. We, frail, needy, immanent creatures experience life and its joys only in relation to, and thanks to, others. The subject (\$) thus comes to experience *jouissance* not through controlling and possessing, but by accepting embodied finitude by means of dispossession, surrender and unknowing. This, for Lacan, is what the mystics were able to achieve, for the most part women, but

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<sup>28</sup> *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, 306.

<sup>29</sup> ‘God and the *Jouissance* of The (barred) Woman,’ in: Juliet Mitchell & Jacqueline Rose (eds.), *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the Ecole Freudienne*, (NY 1985), 147. This discourse places Lacan in a quandary that draws him even closer to the mystics, for the radical unknowing of the *cogito* is undermined by his own position as ‘sujet supposé savoir.’ The difficulty of reading Lacan, then, is precisely analogous to that of mystical texts, for he is constantly using both kataphasis and apophasis to gain and then cross out his own authority. Jacqueline Rose thus writes:

‘Much of the difficulty of Lacan’s work stemmed from his attempt to subvert that position from within his own utterance, to rejoin the place of ‘non-knowledge’ which he designated the unconscious, by the constant slippage or escape of his speech, and thereby to undercut the very mastery which his own position as speaker (master and analyst) necessarily constructs. In fact one can carry out the same operation on the statement ‘I do not know’ as Lacan performed on the utterance ‘I am lying’... – for, if I do not know, then how come I know enough to know that I do not know and if I do know that I do not know, then it is not true that I do not know. Lacan was undoubtedly trapped in this paradox of his own utterance.’ Jacqueline Rose ‘Introduction II,’ in: *Feminine Sexuality*, 50.

<sup>30</sup> He develops this idea using the cultural distinction between man and woman, a distinction that has historically placed the (barred) woman on the side of the ‘not all’ because she has been understood by man as lacking the wholeness that is symbolized by the phallic function.

also men, for just as women can identify with the phallic function, so can men identify with the ‘not all.’ He writes:

There is a *jouissance*... of the body which is, if the expression be allowed, *beyond the phallus*... There is a *jouissance* proper to her and of which she herself may know nothing, except that she experiences it – that much she does know... The mystical is by no means that which is not political. It is something serious, which a few people teach us about, and most often women or highly gifted people like Saint John of the Cross – since, when you are male, you don’t have to put yourself on the side of the phallus. You can also put yourself on the side of not-all. There are men who are just as good as women. It does happen... Despite, I won’t say their phallus, despite what encumbers them on that score, they get the idea, they sense that there must be a *jouissance* which goes beyond. That is what we call a mystic...<sup>31</sup>

Lacan characterizes a mystic as experiencing *jouissance* not from the totality and presence of the *cogito*, but from the detachment from this grasping, the acknowledgment that desire is always desire for what is beyond our grasp as ‘I,’ as ‘ego.’<sup>32</sup> In this sense, the Other, whether human or divine, will play the role of the apophatic God, remaining transcendent and ever beyond our caption. If the mystic does not know, it follows that she must be experiencing *jouissance* from a place that is necessarily other to the *cogito*, the *cogito*’s other, which is to say, the body.

Should we then consider Lacan an apophatic mystic of sorts? The prophet of a postmodern apophatic theology? The relationship between Lacanian psychoanalysis and Christian phenomenology is not as tenuous as it might at first appear.<sup>33</sup> In a certain reading, both seek to rehabilitate fallen man: Christianity by means of a transcendent God, with the help of Scripture which relates a revelation; psychoanalysis by means of the transcendent (or subscendent) unconscious, with the help of language which betrays a memory of Adam before his Fall into the symbolic. Instead of Christ, psychoanalysis offers humanity the psychoanalyst, who is, like Christ, a present absence,

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<sup>31</sup> Jacques Lacan in *Feminine Sexuality*, 146–147.

<sup>32</sup> I quote from Lacan once more: ‘As regards the Hadewijch in question, it is the same for Saint Teresa, – you only have to go and look at Bernini’s statue in Rome to understand immediately that she’s coming, there is no doubt about it. And what is her *jouissance*, her *coming* from? It is clear that the essential testimony of the mystics is that they are experiencing it but know nothing about it.’ Jacques Lacan in *Feminine Sexuality*, 147.

<sup>33</sup> Michel de Certeau noticed this correlation, and comments extensively on the monotheistic religion that ‘haunts the house’ of psychoanalysis in his work *Histoire et psychoanalyse: Entre science et fiction* (Paris 1987). See especially pages 258–260.

and like Christ the instigator of a revelation that his invisible gaze (the patient is seen but does not see) helps to disclose. After stating that his own book should be treated as a mystical text, Lacan clarifies what it is that he believes in:

...naturally, you are all going to be convinced that I believe in God. I believe in the *jouissance* of the woman in so far as it is something more... Might not this *jouissance*, which one experiences and knows nothing of, be that which puts us on the path of ex-istence? And why not interpret one face of the Other, the God face, as supported by feminine *jouissance*?<sup>34</sup>

The psychoanalytic cure then, involves the ability to identify with the site of *jouissance*, the body as organism, which is to say the unconscious, before it has been transformed into an 'ideal I,' by means of language. As Bruce Fink explains, 'The I is not already in the unconscious. It may be everywhere presupposed there, but it has to be made to appear.'<sup>35</sup> Lacan can thus be seen as using a mystical technique to show that the subject *is* precisely where it cannot constitute itself as a thinking thing. The 'I' must associate with this unthinkable site and learn to speak in the first person *in 'its' name*. The 'I' that is to say, can only find itself where thinking does not go. 'The real is here that which always returns to the same place – to the place where the subject in so far as it thinks, where the *res cogitans*, does not meet it.'<sup>36</sup> The real, then, as the certainty that the 'I' will always find itself where thinking does not go. In this experience of *jouissance*, where the subject ex-ists, the mystic finds herself before that 'essential object which is not an object any longer, but this something faced with which all words cease and all categories fail, the object of anxiety par excellence.'<sup>37</sup> To accept this experience as the moment of truth is what the mystic and the cured psychoanalytic patient share in common.

We are now in a position to answer the question with which we began. If we are to take seriously Lacan's analysis of ecstasy as an embodied *jouissance* that is an opening to an Other that cannot be utilized by reason as one more object to be understood and mastered, what is left behind by the mystic is not the body, but the *cogito* as set over and against our embodied vulnerabilities, over and against the Other in its radical otherness. If we hope to live

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<sup>34</sup> Jacques Lacan in: *Feminine Sexuality*, 147.

<sup>35</sup> Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, 68.

<sup>36</sup> Lacan, *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse* (Paris 1990), 59.

<sup>37</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Seminar II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954-1955* (NY 1991), 164.

a life of *jouissance* and intersubjective sharing, perhaps it is time to listen to our ecstatic mystics, and confirm a deeply Christian truth: *Corpus mihi est, ergo sum.*