

THEOLOGICAL POSSIBILITIES WITHIN IMAGINARY, REAL AND SYMBOLIC PERCEPTIONS

Stephen Curkpatrick

Stirling Theological College, Melbourne

Lacan's *Imaginary*, *Real* and *Symbolic* represent a dynamic means of mapping human expectations, experience and understanding. Where assumed engagement with *reality in itself* transgresses a symbolic order that supposedly prevents this engagement, without symbolic mediation, reality is traumatic; symbolic mediation too, distorts reality, even as it filters it. The gospel parable of *a father and two sons* and aphorisms of *Ecclesiastes* present examples of dynamic interplay between *imaginary*, *real* and *symbolic* features that illustrate the usefulness of Lacan's *IRS* as a paradigm for engaging interfaces of human custom, conventions, aspirations and calamity, so prefacing engagement with the redemptive impetus of Christian faith.

IMAGINARY, REAL AND SYMBOLIC

Within freedom of choice, imagination is in play—a particular decision is made toward a specific projected outcome, which is presumably advantageous and likely, pleasurable too. Yet the reality present within any significant decision is this: having to take a risk, which might be detrimental; the reality of a decision lies beyond its imagined possibilities. With any decision, custom and law envelop volitional freedom with symbolic limits ranging from social approval to legal prohibitions that can allay drastic decisions and limit irrevocably detrimental trauma. This scene is common in human existence as *imaginary*, *real* and *symbolic* possibilities within human volition and actions. This is the scene of Lacan's *Imaginary*, *Real* and *Symbolic* (*IRS*).¹

A common expression of Lacan's *IRS* might look like the following scenario concerning marriage: imagined expectations of a marriage relationship (*I*), within a social frame of valuations concerning marriage (*S*) and experience of real marriage (*R*). Within this scene, real experience of marriage can distort received social valuations and expectations of marriage (*S*), even as this symbolic reception filters difficult experiences

¹ Jacques Lacan, "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious," *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink in collaboration with H. Fink & R. Grigg (London & New York: W.W. Norton & CO., 2006), 671-702; Anika Lemaire, *Jacques Lacan*, trans. David Macey (London, Boston & Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), 60-61; Marcelle Marini, *Jacques Lacan: The French Context*, trans. Anne Tomiche (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 42-46; Philippe Julien, *Jacques Lacan's Return to Freud: The Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary*, trans. Devra Beck Simiu (New York & London: New York University Press, 1995); Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 164-168; Slavoj Žižek, *Lacan* (London: Granta Books, 2006); Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge MA & London: MIT Press, 1992); *The Most Sublime Hysteric: Hegel with Lacan*, trans. Thomas Scott-Railton (Cambridge & Malden: Polity Press, 2014), 66-69; *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 2009), 118-120; *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London & New York: Verso, 2008), 116-119, 142-144; Duanne Rousselle, "Real, Symbolic, Imaginary," *The Žižek Dictionary*, ed. Rex Butler (Durham: Acumen Publishing, 2014), 213-216; Sean Homer, "Lacan," *Žižek Dictionary*, 158-161.

of marriage (R), providing a structure of durability. Romanticized expectations (I) may be disappointed or even yearn for other imaginary partners in resistance to either real experience of marriage (R) or a distorted frame of social expectations within marriage (S).

Another application of Lacan's *IRS* might look like this in mapping dynamics of work: work, so skill formation, competency and discipline are formed within and contribute to society (S), generating beneficent effects and trajectories in excess of raw forces of the natural world (R), also enduring beyond any individual so as to be beneficial to the next generation (S). Through work, reality is negotiated within social mutuality, generating products of utility, order and creativity (S) that ground and shape imaginative possibilities (I) amid the reality of existence (R). Work, within a social frame of reference (S), instead of revolution (I), is effective in realizing individual possibilities amid the vicissitudes of existence (R).

A further example of applied *IRS* can be cast in the following scenario concerning politics: a lament that voters have *got it wrong* (I) is belied by numerical votes (R) within a democracy (S) that is also distorted by human desire, mendacity and contradiction amid the vicissitudes of social life (R). Belief in legislative solutions to social dilemmas (I) invariably encounters prevarication and compromise within the machinations of governance whereby any legislation is wrought through compromise, its execution also often tardy and less than optimal (R). Coordinating an economy seemingly amounts to getting all the variables right (I), yet immersed in the reality of need, desire, competitiveness and greed (R), economic solutions also distort and scuttle social equilibrium, allaying its realization—so an interweave of *IRS* dynamics.

Imaginary, *Real* and *Symbolic* can interact with various weightings in different configurations and with diverse effects, mapping interaction between imagined, real and symbolic expectations, experience and understanding. An assumed engagement with *reality in itself* is sustained by a tacit fiction, which transgresses a symbolic order that presumably prevents this engagement; yet direct engagement with reality is without mediation by the symbolic, which filters reality, even as it can distort it too.² The quest for reality *in itself*, in imaginary pursuit of a particular pleasure, experience or phenomenon, is precariously exposed to the inassimilable reality of existence, without a symbolic screen to allay exposure to a terrifying void of chance, stupidity, antagonism and death. This is Lacan's *Real*, *Imaginary* and *Symbolic*.

IRS TRAUMAS

Exposure to reality through an imaginary or fictive impetus has the potential to encounter trauma, especially without the mitigating presence of symbolic frames and interpretations—social, legal, customary—to allay raw exposure to existence.³ The symbolic is never fully adequate to such mitigation, which represents another trauma in the difference between expectation of symbolic amelioration of reality and exposure to

² Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge & London: MIT Press, 2009), 17-18, 310-312; *Disparities* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 65-70; *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London & New York: Verso, 2008), 184-190, 438-443; *Trouble in Paradise* (London: Penguin, 2015), 192.

³ Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London & New York: Verso, 2011), 292; *Lacan*, 57.

real trauma, in spite of its symbolic filtering. An imaginary engagement with reality is traumatized by the presence of a stain within reality that prevents its genuine but fictive assimilation. This stain is often perceived as either a symbolic blocking of immediate experience with reality or the breakdown of symbolic expectations of reality, in which reality recoils against symbolic order through raw, confronting and even violent dissent.⁴ The following three scenes illustrate how trauma is encountered in various combinations of Lacan's *Real*, *Imaginary* and *Symbolic*.

Culture shock

First trauma: *Culture shock* occurs in the absence of adequate interpretive means of assimilating what is different, even confronting. If a culture is approached through an imaginary "culture" of glossy tourism advertising, a tourist will lack an adequate interpretive prism to negotiate confronting aspects of a very different culture. An interpretive (symbolic) prism might consist of historical, ideological and pragmatic reasons why governance, relationships and ablutions are different. Any culture has layers of meaning, which engaged with intentional inquiry through its symbolic prisms, can mediate positive cultural encounter—yet not without inassimilable remainder. An imaginary culture engaged through "brochure" images—digital or material—is most unlikely to help negotiate the complex reality encountered. This could also apply to a certain genre of social messaging within an imaginary register after travel brochures; such messaging seeks to allay the trauma of perceived or actual social tension, yet without recognition of reality—of the incomplete human self as a perennial source of social antagonism.

Between virtual and actual

Second trauma: The difference between digital and actual violence is something like encountering another culture merely through tourism advertising. By staging an imaginary encounter with violence, digital violence displaces any interpretive medium by which to negotiate exposure to actual violence. While imaginary violence is encountered within seemingly innocuous digital games, this medium can displace or even erase any political, historical, social or theological medium by which to process the inevitable shock of actual violence. Consequently, exposure to actual occurrences of violence, whether near or far, is experienced as wholly traumatic. Paradoxically, while shock is diminished within digital violence, without an interpretive medium by which to negotiate actual violence, exposure to trauma is increased. Similarly too, and here I pose a question: To what degree does digital and virtual access to trauma *anywhere* effectively fictionalize it as voyeurism, which paradoxically, accentuates its impact?

The thing we love to hate

Third trauma: A thing or person that someone *loves to hate* is a tacit source of enjoyment; enjoyment is in loving the hating. While a particular thing or person is detested—as necessarily erased or banished—this thing or person is also tacitly *loved*, having become essential to a feeling of personal rightness, purpose and

⁴ Žižek, *Disparities*, 156-160; Lacan, 59.

cohesion. Yet loving to hate, fails to evaluate the detested thing or person as a stain within reality—a stain that eludes symbolic assimilation, while inciting imaginary scenarios concerning its antagonism. Social media offers serial versions of such indulgent enjoyment in flaunting vociferous revulsion. Revulsion directed toward a particular detested thing masks by enjoyment of hatred, its necessity. Since the excluded detested thing serves as a point of coherence, it is experienced as both enjoyment and trauma.⁵ For example, an obnoxious politician or public figure is viewed as a detestable stain on the political or civic landscape; indulgent exhibitions of revulsion in response are simultaneously, a source of enjoyment, solidarity and trauma. Removing the source of trauma would also remove the focus of enjoyment and solidarity. Eventually, an alternative *stain* will be engaged.

Imaginary and symbolic engagement

In an imaginary register, a fiction of unmediated engagement with reality is pursued within diverse phenomena; yet reality consists of numerous unpredictable contingencies of existence that recoil on such fictions.⁶ In engagement with presumed naked existence, reality subsumed under any symbolic order is resisted in an imaginary quest of *reality in itself*; tantalized by the pursuit of raw reality, imaginary engagement is exposed to potential self-destruction.⁷ A symbolic order filters reality; tacitly, custom, myth and even superstition soften the hard edge of reality. So too, but more explicitly, religious lore accounts for reality—but never completely. In Lacan's *IRS*, reality is other than the symbolic, yet a phantasmal presence within the symbolic, which presumably allays traumatic exposure to reality, yet never adequately—so reality negotiated through a symbolic prism, such as providence or theodicy, yet without this prism completely circumscribing reality. This is a source of antagonism within symbolic discourses. Ambiguity within the symbolic is supposedly avoided through an imaginary *direct encounter* with reality in itself. The imaginary impetus seeks to engage the visceral or elemental in its fullness without symbolic filters; yet it is precisely the symbolic that mitigates exposure to an abyssal void within reality—of chance contingencies and human caprice.⁸

Impediment and drive

A fragment of reality that cannot be assimilated represents an impediment to free and fulfilling existence; it is a source of antagonism; it must be removed or eliminated. Yet this *impediment* is the very source of drive in seeking to confront and to prevail over its nemesis, so inversely giving purpose; its termination would eliminate drive that sustains existence; but the impediment cannot be assimilated either. As an inassimilable fragment of reality, an impediment presumably blocks one's primary possibilities; yet its perceived

⁵ References, 2.0 above.

⁶ Žižek, *The Universal Exception*, eds. Rex Butler & Scott Stephens (London: Bloomsbury, 2006, 2014), 392-393.

⁷ Žižek, *Did Someone Say Totalitarianism?: Four Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion* (London: Verso, 2002), 163.

⁸ Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 190-195; *Ticklish Subject*, 388-396.

antagonism is a source of purpose; the fantasized antagonistic character of an impediment is also a cohering focus.⁹

IMAGINARY, REAL AND SYMBOLIC: CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURE

Lacan's *IRS* provides a way of mapping human expectations, experience and understanding. The gospel parable of *a father and two sons* presents a dynamic interplay of *imaginary*, *real* and *symbolic* features that illustrate the usefulness of Lacan's *IRS* as a model for engaging the interface of human custom, conventions, aspirations and calamity, so prefacing engagement with the redemptive impetus of Christian faith. The aphorisms of *Ecclesiastes* increase the complexity of imaginary, real and symbolic mapped within the parable. *Ecclesiastes* offers a scene in which imaginary, real and symbolic are cast before us candidly within the context of human existence that is also a gift within Christian evaluation.

Home, prodigality and return (IRS)

In the gospel parable (Luke 15:11-32), a father represents a symbolic reality within which there are children, gratuity, provision and so the possibility of flourishing life through a combination of symbolic and material existence. Tacitly, the younger son rejects the symbolic existence of home and seeks an imaginary reality or existence elsewhere. He seeks an imaginary future that promises to be liberating and an encounter with real life in its immediacy. The imaginary real turns out to be a reality of raw existence that is indifferent to the son's aspirations; the son has lost any mediating or symbolic frame within a real encounter with existence, which is confronting and diminishing.

Under duress within reality, the son now recognizes the symbolic as a necessary frame of existence, for while there is accountability and humility within a symbolic order, it is a sphere that can allay raw exposure to reality; the symbolic is a source of community within which, even menial work, by contrast to a romanticized imaginary reality, offers the possibility of existence.

On returning to the symbolic realm, even within an expected diminished role, the son discovers life as gift (grace) beyond this symbolic order perceived as calculation.

The elder son views the symbolic realm with calculation, with the father representing the symbolic order; he cannot accept that the symbolic was always gift. The elder son imagines the imaginary realm of the younger son's venture, suggesting that tacitly, he too would rather live in the same imaginary possibilities than in the present symbolic order, as he perceives it. The father, embodying this symbolic order, discloses the symbolic realm as a gift that allays death through exposure to actual reality within the promises of imaginary life; the symbolic gives by framing identity and existence within structures of dignity and safety, which are otherwise squandered in either an imaginary quest (younger son) or dreams (elder son) of real life, without having anticipated the callous indifference of actual reality, which any imaginary reality masks.

⁹ Žižek, *Organs without Bodies* (London & New York: Routledge, 2004), 2012, 82-83, 88-89, 92; *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 184, 199-200; Eagleton, *The Event of Literature* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2013), 214-215.

The lacanian *Imaginary* is an exposure to the *Real* of existence and its potential for traumatic recoil in having resisted any screening value of the *Symbolic*. The *Real*, paradoxically, is a source of enticement, promise, compulsion and traumatic experience.

Human existence (IRS)

Ecclesiastes depicts the reality of chance, stupidity, elemental contingencies and death. Various renditions of the symbolic might assuage the trauma of these, while imaginary fictions offer deceptive safety within life. *Ecclesiastes* shows us human existence in the variegated ways in which people encounter the imaginary, real and symbolic. The following samples are cited: *freedom and chance* (9:11-12), *time and obscurity of purpose* (8:5-11:6), *relationality* (4:7-16) and *desire and possession* (2:1-11; 5:9-16; 6:1-9).

Freedom of choice generates imaginary possibilities, yet choice must ultimately negotiate the reality of decision, especially contextual ethical decisions that are not corralled by a code—the symbolic that by custom, convention and regulation allays too many traumas through the risks of decision invoked by imaginary possibilities within freedom of choice. Further, chance is reality that thwarts an imaginary cast freedom. Chance is exposure to the real, which scuttles imaginary freedom, eluding intention, as a trauma that is only partially ameliorated by symbolic renditions of benign providence or consistent causality within existence: regardless of speed, courage, prudence, wealth or favour—everyone is subject to chance contingencies, human stupidity, bad timing and so the possibility of real disaster.

Time replicates chance in offering reality that stymies imaginary possibilities, even if partially moderated by symbolic assurances. *There is a time for everything and every matter under heaven*. Yet immersed in time, we are never finally in sync with time, for our time is also being taken away in every moment we assume is gained. We presume at least to have present time, yet this is forever receding away from us, never being secured as *now* because it always ceases to be now as *then*. We are suspended between what is no longer and what is not yet over an ever disappearing now. We are never in sync with time so as to presume we possess it. Time is reality that scuttles imaginary intent, however much we undergird existence by symbolic grids of temporal assurance.

Relationships—in which two or more people in close proximity desire the best effects and outcomes of their liaison—can become stressful, traumatic and even *monstrous*.¹⁰ Within relationships, annoying habits and idiosyncratic propensities represent the reality of another person whose behaviour is different; reality can be experienced within incorrigibly different expectations—for example, contingencies that were unknown or chance events that were unexpected when relationships were formed, especially relationships extending into marriage. Reality exhibits various forms of social or vocational pressure that change behaviour patterns or make evident inadequacies in response to stress, anxiety or variegated vicissitudes of human existence. The imaginary is posited as ideal partner, ideal sex, ideal family, ideal colleagues and so an ideal future calibrated from these. Where imaginary possibilities prevail, symbolic underpinnings of society

¹⁰ Žižek, *Did Someone Say Totalitarianism?*, 163.

by custom and implicit expectations are inadequately formed or nurtured, unable to meet traumatic challenges of reality that imaginary projections mask.

The impetus or drive for possessions is their imaginary fulfilment of desire. Yet once desire is sated, the reality of possessions is the failure of their imaginary impetus. Their imaginary framing of life assumedly adds security and esteem. Desire creates an imaginary illusion of completing itself, by assimilating what it has constituted in a desired object. An object appears to be external to a person's desire, but a person constitutes the value of an object by desire and intentional assimilation. A desired object substantiates a person's desire; it is a real object, independent of that person, yet it is also consumed, assimilated by a person's desire. Desire cancels itself. Tacitly, people know that an object will not complete their identity, yet they continue to posit such possibility in the desire to consume diverse objects.¹¹ Desire generates an insatiable thirst. Desire is projected onto something as desirable, which is impossible to acquire, because it is a projection. Even if a particular desired thing is possessed, the source of desire is not this thing but an investment in the thing as desirable. Human subjectivity is the source of desire, not any object; an object can never satisfy desire, because desire is a subjective perspective concerning a thing. An object not only does not satisfy desire, its projection from a source of desire, a person, is invariably not noticed. Dissatisfaction will later find another object or thing on which to project desire.¹²

Ecclesiastes presents many aspects of human existence and so variegated ways in which people could be shown to encounter Lacan's *Imaginary*, *Real* and *Symbolic*.

IN SUMMARY

Within a lacanian focus, an imaginary *real* existence has no screening capacity against recoil from raw reality (R); reality can destroy a person, akin to an overconfident mountain climber who loses judicious respect for the elemental and is destroyed by its recoil. Wholly exposed to reality within an imaginary fantasy of encountering unmediated existence (I), there is no prism (S) through which to give provisional sense to reality, which is therefore experienced as both antagonistic stain and unmitigated possibilities for trauma. With the pervasive contemporary loss or perceived breakup of any received symbolic framing—and so an impetus away from the symbolic to imaginary engagement with presumed reality in itself—trauma is accentuated as a direct intrusion of reality. Pursuit of the imaginary within the dynamics of Lacan's *IRS*, fulfils a contemporary impetus to embrace reality that supposedly dispenses with symbolic frames, to encounter an imaginary *reality in itself*, yet being wholly exposed to traumas of reality.

People respond differently to traumatic events. Within a focus on Lacan's *IRS*, responses might occur with varying levels of interpretive adequacy—within imaginative naivety, heroic acceptance of reality or a

¹¹ Georg W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind: A Revised Version of the Wallace and Miller Translations*, rev. with intro and commentary Michael Inwood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), paras 426-429; *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), paras. 185, 190-195.

¹² Žižek, *On Belief* (London: Routledge, 2001), 135; *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 259.

tertiary symbolic order. It is possible to be exposed imaginatively, to real hard edges of life, with human resources of symbolic mitigation, such as lore, law and wisdom. For Christian faith, composite exposure to life is resourced christologically by genuine immersion in the materiality of existence—so its tangible hard edges, which are mitigated within and by a community of generosity and veracity that is neither naïve in imagination nor symbolically crimped in its capacity to enfold human life within relationships of composite skill and life engagement.