

Horkos [oath] and the sacrament of language – The purloined letter

Author:Johann-Albrecht Meylahn¹**Affiliation:**¹Department of Practical Theology, University of Pretoria, South Africa**Correspondence to:**

Johann-Albrecht Meylahn

Email:

jmeylahn@lantic.net

Postal address:

PO Box 14885, Lyttelton 0140, South Africa

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The article will bring a reading of Agamben's interpretation of *horkos* [oath] in the *Sacrament of language*, a reading of Derrida's faith as the grammar of language, into conversation with Lacan's interpretation of Poe's 'The purloined letter' by taking into consideration the context of this reading: South Africa. South Africa is a multilingual context in the fullest sense of the word 'multilingual', and as such, it is faced with the dilemma of a corrupt postal system. The postal system is a metaphor for the system of communication where messages are sent and received. This postal system is corrupt as the sender and receiver of messages are not sacramentally bound by the same oath, and therefore the letters are doomed to be purloined. Derrida's *différance* and the grammar of faith transcends the various languages and the various oaths as the quasi-transcendental condition for the sacrament of language, thereby opening a sacred space to encounter the inevitable corruption of the postal service.

'In my father's house there are many rooms' (Jn 14:2). The 'truth' of the matter is that my parent's house is a divided house, and the various rooms have barricaded themselves against each other in fear of the other.

The presumption is that living in a multi-linguistic country implies that there will be miscommunication as people speak different languages, and one can never translate perfectly from one language to another. Therefore, there will be misunderstanding, that is to say miscommunication, as the letter (message) will be purloined. This is what is happening in South Africa – there are numerous languages, so much so that one could say it is a country lost in translation. Yet it is not only the lack of perfect translation between the 11 official languages, as there are numerous language games or discourses even within a single language. For example, if one takes the event or drama of money being taken from the government coffers without the necessary authorisation, this event is interpreted differently in different language games. I will be using this event (trauma) as an example throughout this article.

This event or, as Lacan would refer to it (Hurst 2008:352) in reference to Poe's (2008) 'The purloined letter', this letter can be interpreted differently according to the discourse in which it finds itself, and according to this discourse, the actors will find themselves in different positions, for example as either the criminal (corrupt official stealing from the poor) or as the heroes of the struggle taking what is due to them and at last receiving the payment (reward) that the world (those benefitting from the struggle years) owes them.

In the one discourse, the government official is stealing and is thus corrupt, but in a different language game, this event is ethical as it is motivated by the idea of distributive justice. These two languages will never meet and find common ground and thus one could say that the letter (communication) between them will continuously be purloined as their speakers are bound by a different ethical code, namely the code of that particular language game. Therefore, it becomes difficult to translate the act (the event) as the letter is purloined in a multilingual context. Yet it would be possible to bring these different discourses around a table and talk, not so much about the event, but how the event is being interpreted in the various discourses and thus come to greater understanding of the discourses.

What makes the situation even more difficult is if discourses employed are used as rhetorical ploys to cover up an underlying greed. In other words, if it is convenient to have this 'ethical discourse' with which to justify or condemn actions, but the discourse has very little to do with the event as it is purely used to mask the discourse of greed or disempowerment or whatever else might motivate such a discourse. This is the challenge to which Agamben (2010) tried to respond in his book *The sacrament of language*. Language in the contemporary Western world has become empty and vain (loss of meaning) and in that sense blasphemous. It has also become blasphemous in another sense, namely in the sense of misusing God's name in various forms of fundamentalism in religion as well as in science.

This is an intolerable situation, and it needs to be countered. Agamben seeks the necessary remedy (*pharmakon*¹) to this loss of meaning by pleading for a return of the oath and thus truthful or trustworthy speech.

This event (the stealing of state funds) places individuals into different positions, depending on the discourse (language game) in which the letter (event) is interpreted. To try and understand why and how language should ethically bind its speaker, I shall follow the arguments of Agamben (2010) from his book *The sacrament of language* where he develops a kind of theology to protect the inner logic of language – where language ethically binds the speaker so that word and event are ethically linked. Agamben tries to establish this link by unpacking the meaning of the oath (*horkos*).

The oath was introduced with the primary function to guarantee the truth and efficacy of language (Agamben 2010:4), that is, to guarantee the truth and efficacy of one's words. The traditional image that an oath evokes is that of a person standing with one hand on the Bible and the other hand in the air, accompanied by the words: I swear to speak the truth and nothing but the truth. This action of placing one's hand on the Bible and swearing is an attempt to guarantee the truthfulness of the subsequently spoken words. In this action of the oath, the name of God is evoked twice: first as witness to what is said and second as curse for perjury. Firstly, God's name is evoked as witness: 'As God is my witness!' In the second sense, the name of God is evoked in the following sense: 'If I do not speak the truth may God or the gods strike me down.' The oath (in God's name) was introduced as a way to ensure the trustworthiness of language, but with the oath, the possibility of perjury is opened (Agamben 2010:6–7). The very fact that, in certain situations, an oath is necessary translates into the 'fact' that speech as such is not trustworthy and that my yes is not yes and my no is not no, as referred to in the Bible in Matthew 5:37. It is also certain that an oath can only guarantee truthfulness in a society where there is general faith in God or the gods that are invoked in the oath. If one does not believe in the God named or if one does not 'believe' in the Bible, laying one's hand on it or swearing by a God will not have the desired effect. Thus the classical idea of fearing God's punishment for lying only works if one believes in God. Agamben (2010) challenges this popular view of the oath, arguing that this was never the primary intention of the oath to call God as witness. He argues this by unpacking the link between God's name and the oath and by indicating cases where God is not only used as witness or punishment.

One interpretation of the origin of oaths is to link the oath to divine speaking. Philo argues, in reference to the creation stories in Genesis, that divine speaking is unique in that God speaks and what he says is done. Thus, there is a direct connection between word and event or thing, or between word and reality (see Philo 1929:65). The oath, which invokes God's name, is an attempt to conform human language to

1. See Derrida's discussion on the *pharmakon* which is Plato's interpretation of writing as both remedy (that which preserves presence) but also poison (that which destroys presence) (Derrida 1981:99f.).

divine language where words and actions, words and reality, coincide. Thus the oath, speaking in God's name, is an attempt to make human language credible (*pistos*). Philo continues and argues that God is trustworthy, not because of the oath (Philo 1929:93), but because it is God who assures the oath. God's word, divine language, is an oath just as *horkos* is *pistos par excellence* in the classical tradition (Agamben 2010:22), and just as *pistos (eman)* is the attribute of God *par excellence*: God is trustworthy as he is faithful, in the Judaic tradition. Philo thus establishes an essential connection between God and oath, making oath the very word of God: Logos is oath.

What is at stake in the oath is the relationship between words and events or things, or language and reality. Agamben argues that the testimony is given by language itself, and the name of the 'god/s' is not a testimony of testimony but rather names the potential implicit in the very act of speech (Agamben 2010:33). The name of God is invoked in the oath – not as witness, but God's name explores the positive potential of language. In other words, the oath was not introduced to add something to language to make it trustworthy, but the oath describes something of the inner functioning (logic) of language. The oath describes the event of speaking where words allow things or events to come to be as they stand out in being named.

Herman Usener's book *Sondergötter* (1985) explores the use of divine names and the potential implicit in speech. The thesis of his book is that the names of the gods are initially names of actions or brief events (Usener 1985:75) and that these names were only later divinised in myth, art and poetry (Usener 1985:316). In other words, events and actions in the life of the community became identifiable as differentiated actions or differentiated events by the act of naming. These events and actions were named with divine names. The god (name) who presides over the singular activity or situation is nothing but the very name of the activity or situation. What is divinised is the very event of the name, the nomination. Nomination which isolates (differentiates) and renders visible a gesture, an act, a thing, creates a 'special god' and is a 'momentary divinity' (*Augenblicksgott*). It is in naming that that which is named appears, and it is linked to a divine act of creation. The power of naming is divine power as names allow things to appear. Agamben (2010) argued as follows:

Like the *Sondergott*, the god invoked in the oath is not properly the witness of the assertion or the imprecation: he represents, he *is* the very event of language in which words and things are indissolubly linked. ... If in polytheism, the name *assigned* to the god names this or that event of language, this or that specific naming, this or that *Sondergott*, in monotheism *God's* name names language itself. (pp. 46, 49)

The potentially infinite dissemination of singular, divine events of naming gives way to the divinisation of the *logos* as such, to the name of God as archi-event of language that takes place in names (Agamben 2010:49). Language is the word of God, and the word of God is, in the words of Philo, an oath; it is God insofar as he reveals himself in the *logos* as the 'faithful one' (*pistos par excellence*) (Agamben 2010:49–50).

God is the oath-taker in the language of which humanity is only the speaker. In the Cabbala, the metaphysical origin of all language is in the name of God (Scholem 1972:59). Thus in monotheism, language becomes divine, that is, language becomes oath, it becomes *Logos*. To pronounce the name of God means to understand it as the experience of language in which it is impossible to separate name and being, words and things (Agamben 2010:52). That is to say, the name of God expresses the status of the *logos* in the dimension of *fides*, and thus, in the oath, which is truthful, nomination immediately actualises the existence of what it names (Agamben 2010:52–53). Agamben (2010) continues to argue that every naming:

... every act of speech, is in this sense an oath in which the *logos* (the speaker in the *logos*) pledges to fulfil his word, swears on its truthfulness, on the correspondence between words and things that is realised in it. (p. 46)

The correspondence between words and things is realised in the *logos*.

The name of God names the name that is always true, that is, that experience of language that is not possible to doubt (Agamben 2010:54).

Doubt and perjury enter once one pretends to formulate a veridiction as an assertion, an oath as a denotative expression and (as the Church began to do from the 4th century by means of conciliar creeds) a profession of faith as dogma. It is then that the experience of speech splits, and perjury and lie irreducibly spring up (Agamben 2010:58). In the attempt to check this split in the experience of language, law and religion were born. Both law and religion were born to seek to tie speech to things and to bind, 'by means of curses and anathemas, speaking subjects to the veritative power of their speech, to their "oath" and to their declaration of faith' (Agamben 2010:58). Something appears in that it is named (asserted), and in this original naming, assertion, it is true. Thus, in the archi-event of language, the assertorial and veridictional aspects of language are inseparable (Agamben 2010:47). This is the archi-event of language to which Agamben seeks to return.

This speaking of language hallows out a space in which humans as speaking animals can dwell, and ethically, it binds them to the language.² Humans are bound in the oath of the speaking of language³ – the sacrament of language –

2.'The decisive element that confers on human language its peculiar virtue is not in the tool itself but in the place it leaves to the speaker, in the fact that it prepares within itself a hollowed-out form that the speaker must always assume in order to speak – that is to say, in the ethical relation that is established between the speaker and his language' (Agamben 2010:71). The lack that is experienced in nature is not supplemented with a sign, but humans have placed themselves in that gap as humans have put their very nature at stake in language (Agamben 2010:68). Just as Foucault said that man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question (Foucault 1990:143), so also it can be said of language, namely that humanity is a living being whose language places her life in question (Agamben 2010:69). These two need to be thought together as they are inseparable and constitutively dependent on each other.

3.'... the oath is a consecration of the living human being through the word to the word' (Agamben 2010:66). The oath is situated at the intersection of humanity as political animal and humanity as linguistic animal. The oath is the anthropogenic operator 'by means of which the living being, who has discovered itself speaking, has decided to be responsible for his words and devoting himself to the *logos*, to constitute himself as the living being who has language' (Agamben 2010:69). Thus the oath binds together in an ethical and political connection words, things and actions (Agamben 2010:69).

which can be interpreted as the letter always arriving at its destination as there is an ethical bind that holds it on track. This would mean that different language-archi-events would ethically bind people to different language communities. In other words, different linguistic communities are bound by different oaths, and therefore their truthfulness and trustworthiness does not necessarily coincide. The implication is that the letters (communication) between these different language-systems are bound to be purloined as the postal system is corrupt: There are different oaths ethically binding people to different languages. The oath does not bind across different languages. Different oaths, that is, different archi-events of languages, create different hallowed spaces for humans and therefore different ethical obligations, thereby creating different political spaces. The letters (communication) are doomed to be purloined in this multilingual space.

Yet Lacan in his seminar (Lacan 1972), which is an analysis of Edgar Allen Poe's (2008) 'The purloined letter', argues on the contrary that the letter always arrives at its destination. Was Lacan not aware of these various discourses, or was he not aware of the multilingual context that he could make such a statement? No, Lacan was most certainly very aware of the various discourses and that each discourse positions the various 'actors' in different roles or places (Lacan 1972:45) with regards to each other. In other words, each discourse creates a particular social bond (Verhaeghe 1999:95). To say it in the language of Agamben, the discourse hallows out a space for the dwelling of the speaking animal and binds the speaking animal to that particular speaking of language (discourse). The difference between Lacan and Agamben is that, for Agamben, it is the oath that ethically binds the speaker to the speaking of language whilst for Lacan the speaking is an empty signifier (lack) and there is no direct bind – what binds is not an oath linking speaking and event but the structural necessity of the particular discourse wherein the event is unconcealed. Thus for Lacan, truth is no longer found in the relationship between word and event or thing but in intersubjective relationships.⁴

So what was he referring to when he argued that the letter always arrives at its destination? Firstly, one needs to understand what the letter is for Lacan. The letter is the event or the drama (see Hurst 2008:352). If the letter is the event, then, yes indeed, it will always arrive at its destination because the event as such does not exist. The event discussed at the beginning of this article was the event of money being taken from the government coffers. That event as such does not exist. Thereby I am not arguing that it never took place but that there is no access to this event beyond the particular discourse in which it presents (unconceals) itself. The event only exists insofar as it is unconcealed in a

4.'The "true word" is the word authenticated by the other in the given or pledged faith (trust). The other renders it adequate to itself – and no longer to the object – by returning the message in an inverted form, by making it true, by identifying from then on the subject with himself, by "announcing that he is the same" Adequation and authentication – proceeds through intersubjectivity, the word is "therefore an act, and as such, presupposing a subject"' (Derrida 1975:90, n. 31 in reference to Lacan 1968:13).

particular discourse. In other words, this event only reveals itself (unconceals itself) as event within a particular discourse (archi-event) of language or speaking. The event appears as follows: Mr X stole money from the government coffers. Or it appears as: Mr X took what was rightfully his. Which one of these two options appeals to one depends on the language game of which one is part. There is no event beyond either one of these two⁵ discourses. The event comes to one already clad in a particular discourse as there is no naked event. Lacan's famous argument is that the letter always arrives at its destination. However, the event does not have a destination! It does not, but the discourse in which the event appears has a destination, and that destination is where the letter arrives. To understand this, one would need to take the Saussurian differentiation between *parole* and *langue* into consideration. Lacan interprets Poe's 'The purloined letter' as a narration that tells the story of the structural interrelation between the orders of the Real, Imaginary and Symbolic (Hurst 2008:348). *Parole* is the everyday speech in which the different characters communicate with each other whilst *langue* refers to the structural or grammatical structure that conditions *parole*, that is to say, the discourse or language game that both limits and makes *parole* possible. The meaning (content) of the letter would be *parole*, but Lacan is not particularly interested in the content of the letter. Poe likewise is not interested in the content as the actual content of the letter is never divulged. All that we are told in the tale is the possible and actual effects of the letter. The letter places and displaces the characters with regards to each other. For example, the queen is in a position of trust and faithfulness towards her king, but the letter displaces her into a position of transgression of that trust and faith. Therefore it is vitally important for her to regain control over the letter. Thus the focus in the conversation between Lacan and Derrida concerning Poe's 'The purloined letter' is on this *langue* function (discourse or language-game function) of the letter.

The letter that always arrives at its destination can be interpreted as Žižek does in the imaginary and in the symbolic (Žižek 2008:22). These interpretations of the letter arriving at its destination all focus on the speaking of language and thus on the structural necessity of language or, one can say, on a certain discourse necessity.

The archi-event is the speaking of language, as discussed above where in the archi-event the speaking of the word is supposed to coincide with the event or thing. However, what is forgotten in this archi-event of speaking is that the word spoken is already a supplement. It is a *pharmakon* and thus poisoned as this archi-word of the archi-event of the speaking of language already proclaims the death of presence. Here, Lacan and Derrida would agree although they use different terms to say something rather similar. Derrida refers to archi-writing and Lacan refers to the empty signifier or pure signifier (Hurst 2008:353). Thus, in Agamben's archi-event of the speaking of language there is already inscribed an archi-writing as the speaking of the word is already a supplement

5. The possible discourses in which this event reveals itself is infinite, but for the purpose of the point I am seeking to make, I shall only refer to these two options.

(see Derrida's article '...That dangerous supplement...' 1997:141–164), or there is, in Lacan's terminology, the empty signifier. It is at this site (*Lichtung*) that one would need to locate the difference between Derrida and Lacan's interpretation of 'The purloined letter'.

Lacan reads 'The purloined letter' as a form of blindness associated with every form of insight (Hurst 2008:349), and this blindness has to do with a desire for mastery. This is structurally true, and Derrida (1975) would agree, but what he challenges in *The purveyor of truth* is the finality or status of this 'Truth'. The criticism is very fine indeed and difficult to pinpoint because they seem to be saying the same thing differently. Lacan is as critical as Derrida is of the idea of a final truth as he reads 'The purloined letter' as a blindness that comes with insight and the desire for mastery. He thus criticises the idea of gaining psychoanalytic insight with which one can master others because the moment you think you have this insight you will be blind – a blindness, one could say, that comes automatically with the desire for mastery. Lacan argues and warns of the danger of the analyst's discourse becoming one of power and mastery as that is the very trap into which the Minister, Dupin, and he himself fell, and thus one needs to be wary of this trap. What Derrida is arguing, whilst taking Lacan's warnings into consideration, is that his thoughts remains a Teaching that presents itself as a kind of truth even if the truth proclaimed therein is the truth of lack, that is the truth of non-truth. Lacan argues not for the mastery of knowing but the mastery of not-knowing, the mastery of truth as lack – but this is still mastery. I would argue, taking into consideration Derrida's thoughts, that as long as this discourse is so clearly spelled out and can be given a name, Lacanian discourse, the discourse of the analyst, or Lacanian Teaching, it becomes a 'master discourse'.

This is why Derrida argues that *différance* can never become a name and most certainly not a capitalised name, nor can it be translated into a system or theory, but it remains only that which makes naming possible (see Derrida 1982:27; Bennington 1993:77–78). Lacan's theory or discourse or ideas have become Lacanian psychoanalysis. It has become a capitalised name and this name can be deconstructed, and therefore Derrida argues for the letter possibly-not-arriving at its destination (Derrida 1975:107), thereby taking the finality out of the Lacanian 'truth' or Teaching and opening it up for the 'perhaps/possibility'. Johnson (1977) argues that Derrida's critique is not so much against Lacan but against a certain tradition that has evolved, a Lacanian interpretation of Lacan (Johnson 1977:477–478). Actually, Derrida and Lacan are in agreement, but Derrida's critique is against the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of Lacan's thoughts. Derrida argues that this is something that inevitably happens to texts and thoughts – there is a natural abstraction that takes place. For example, there will always develop out of the oeuvre of Plato's texts Plato's philosophy (see Derrida 1995a:119), and likewise, there will develop out of the Lacanian corpus a Lacanian psychoanalysis, just as out of Derrida's corpus will develop something that can be called Derridian as Bennington (1993)

tried to do in his 'Derridabase'. It is something that has happened to Derrida himself, and it will happen, BUT this abstraction has to be deconstructed. Hurst (2008), as Johnson, argues for the proximity between Derrida and Lacan. I do not wish to disagree with them, but I do want to argue that the difference between Lacan and Derrida also lies on a different level, namely in Lacan's thoughts themselves and not only in the abstraction of his thoughts in the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of his work. In this article, I would like to argue that Derrida does criticise Lacan and that the criticism can be identified with the use of the ideas of their respective understanding of the role of the quasi-transcendental truth in reference to the letter. For Derrida, in reference to Lacan, 'it [the letter] cannot be found where it is to be found, or else (but is this the same thing?) can be found where it cannot be found' (Derrida 1975:44). Or as Lacan (1972) says it:

Which is why we cannot say of the purloined letter that, like other objects, it must be *or* not be in a particular place but that unlike them it will be *and* not be where it is, wherever it goes ... (pp. 53–55)

Derrida is not challenging Lacan's Teaching (he would probably agree with Lacan), but he is challenging the status and role played by this Teaching. I specifically capitalise the 't' of Teaching because that is what Derrida challenges. He challenges the presentation of the Teaching as something *with which* to analyse and interpret subjects, texts and contexts. It is presented as a kind of method that has disciples, so much so that disciples can boldly state: I am a Lacanian!

The teaching is that 'Truth' is lack, and this teaching is very similar to Derrida's discovery of *différance* so that one can argue that they are very similar and that both function as a quasi-transcendental, neither seeking to be the final transcendental in the long history of the philosophical search for the final transcendental truth. Derrida's allergy with Lacan is that Lacan presents this Truth (as lack) as a Teaching that can be followed. It is a Teaching that can create disciples, and therefore, it is a Teaching that one can master and should master whereas Derrida's *différance* is not something one can master; if anything, it happens and autodeconstructs any attempt at seeking to master it. One cannot become a disciple of *différance*. At best, one can become an appreciator and witness its effects and help others see these effects. Once one states it in such terms, there will be those who would argue that it is what Lacan argues as well, and the difference is only in how they say it – well, if all we have is the text (Derrida 1997:158) then that difference is important because that is all we have.

Where does this leave one with regards to the theme and specifically the multilingual context of this article?

That the letter always arrives at its destination is indeed true within a particular discourse, within a particular *langue*. Does it, however, arrive at its destination when two different language games seek to communicate with each

other? For example, in the dialogue between Dupin and the Prefect of the police, when two different discourses seek to communicate, one has a situation of the deaf man and one who hears (Lacan 1972:47). Thus in a multilingual context, the letters are bound to be purloined. However, Derrida argues that they need not be purloined, only possibly purloined. It is not a structural necessity, nor is there an oath that binds, and thus, they either arrive or do not arrive – as there is no final structural necessity. All there is is perhaps, and even perhaps is a double perhaps: perhaps perhaps.

This perhaps leaves one with a little more faith than with the discovery of Truth, even if that 'final' discovered truth is a lack. Lacan plays with the idea of Truth, even an open-ended truth, or truth as lack, truth as a woman. To these ideas of truth, Derrida responds with something less certain, less capitalised and rather more auto-deconstructive, namely the idea of a trace (Derrida 1982:12, 21, 1997:46) in which all one can have is faith and hope, but never mastery. Thus, the trace does not allow for any kind of work-righteousness of a master, but it is purely a gift: the grace of the trace.

Where does that leave South Africa, as a multilingual context, with her democracy and postal service? It leaves South Africa with nothing more and nothing less than the name of God. Not God as final truth, not God as in the guarantee of the oath, but the name of God as the endless desertification of language (Derrida 1995b:55–56), and the only way to cross this desert is with faith and hope. In God we trust. How does that help a multilingual context? It makes the context vulnerable and thus open to the other, fully conscious that the letter might not arrive and thus calling the context to trust beyond the safety of knowledge and the mastery of knowledge. It is calling the context to trust beyond the 'safety' of the masculine death drive, beyond the feminine death drive that questions and transgresses all, but also beyond the analyst drive who knows it all in that she pretends to know nothing and transforms her not-knowing position into a dogma.

The alternative is to move towards truly being *perhaps* knowledgeable rather than pretending to know nothing. It is to move towards being uncertain about everything, thus bringing faith into the play, which opens the space for trust or the oath (*horkos* as faith), which binds the democracy⁶ to the democracy always still to come, thus binding what is to what was, but never present, and what always is still to come – maybe binding democracy and our multilingual society to the desire of the Real of democracy.

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6.The oath that binds together the democracy (Lycurgus 1962:79)

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