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# Object-Disoriented Ontology; or, the Subject of *What Is Sex?*

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Though there are a number of reasons as to why Alenka Zupančič's *What Is Sex?* is a crucial intervention into the fields of contemporary philosophy and psychoanalysis, perhaps none is more crucial, given the current "ontological turn" in critical theory, than its trenchant defense of the necessity of retaining the category of the subject for any ontology that aims to be truly realist or materialist. Proceeding from this premise, in what follows I will be focusing exclusively on what is by far the book's longest, most complex chapter — one that comprises its entire second half — "Object-Disoriented Ontology." The first section of the essay consists of a brief overview of Zupančič's Lacanian rejoinder to the various "new"/"speculative" realisms and materialisms currently seeking to demote and thereby (intentionally or not) expunge the subject from ontology — a rejoinder grounded upon an insistence not merely on the subject's continued relevance for, but its indispensability to — indeed, its very ineradicability from — properly realist/materialist inquiry. From here, the second and third sections aim to supplement Zupančič's position by examining the ways in which the tenets of this "Real ontology," as I term it, are borne out by a third field — one that, as it so often does in Lacan's own work, helps to suture the two fields that claim the majority of Zupančič's attention throughout *What Is Sex?*, philosophy and psychoanalysis: literature. Taking Zupančič's focus on the death drive throughout "Object-Disoriented Ontology" as my starting point, I look in particular at Herman

Melville's *Moby-Dick*, a novel whose tragic Captain Ahab offers a prime illustration of the role that the death drive plays in rendering material reality "not-all," ontologically incomplete. Section two begins by doubling back from drive to desire, the latter of which is exemplified by the "intangible malignity" and "inscrutable malice" that Ahab anamorphically ascribes to Moby Dick; it ends by considering the point at which desire crosses into — opens a path onto — drive: the point of "pure desire," a point exemplified by the figure of Fedallah, the diabolical fourth harpooner of Ahab's crew who is born of Ahab's dreams. The third and final section looks more closely at how Fedallah, the surplus-enjoyment produced by pure desire, functions as a literal embodiment of the excessive materiality of the drive. In so using *Moby-Dick* as a means of attending to the impossible matter generated by the drive's insistence, my primary aim is to not merely corroborate, but to strengthen — to "double-down" on, as it were — the rationale behind Zupančič's own insistence on the impossibility of eliminating the subject from materialist thought.

### Ontology's Real Subject

Let me begin by rehearsing the case that Zupančič makes for a Lacanian realism/materialism in the book's lengthy final chapter, "Object-Disoriented Ontology." Of particular importance here are two of the chapter's six sections: "Realism in Psychoanalysis" and "Death Drive II: Lacan and Deleuze." The former consists primarily of an engagement with Quentin Meillassoux's *After Finitude* — the ur-text of so-called "speculative realism" — in which Zupančič focuses on Meillassoux's recourse to the concept of the "arche-fossil" as a means of exposing the limits of what he terms "correlationism."<sup>1</sup> As Meillassoux defines it, correlationism is the idea — an idea, he maintains, that underwrites virtually all post-Kantian philosophy — "according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other" — the idea, in other words, that it is "[im]possible to consider the realms of subjectivity and objectivity independently of one another."<sup>2</sup> For Meillassoux, arche-fossils — objects that antedate the advent of human beings (e.g., dinosaur fossils) — demonstrate the limits to the correlationist approach insofar as they confront us with the existence of matter prior to, and thus altogether outside of, human thought.<sup>3</sup> In so doing, they prove that we *can*, in fact, access being in-itself, that we can recover "the *great outdoors*," the "*absolute* outside of pre-critical [i.e., pre-Kantian] thinkers."<sup>4</sup>

Given Zupančič's groundbreaking work on the relation between Kant and Lacan in her earlier *Ethics of the Real*, that she felt compelled in *What Is Sex?* to

respond to Meillassoux's critique of the "Kantian catastrophe" (as he more pointedly characterizes correlationism toward the end of *After Finitude*) should come as no surprise.<sup>5</sup> She begins her rejoinder by noting that, from the Lacanian perspective, Meillassoux's speculative realism/materialism — a realism/materialism that, much to Zupančič's surprise, depends largely on "a straightforward belief that the nature which [science] describes is absolute and exists 'out there,' independently of us" — is not truly realist/materialist.<sup>6</sup> Turning to Lacan himself, Zupančič cites the following comments regarding "the realist argument" in Seminar XVI, *D'un Autre à l'autre*: "We cannot resist the idea that nature is always there, whether we are there or not, we and our science, as if science were indeed ours and we weren't determined by it. Of course I won't dispute this. Nature is there." And yet, Lacan concludes, "To be a philosopher of nature has never been considered as a proof of materialism, nor of scientific quality."<sup>7</sup> What this means, Zupančič explains, is that for Lacan:

materialism is not guaranteed by any matter. It is not the reference to matter as the ultimate substance from which all emerges (and which, in this conceptual perspective, is often highly spiritualized) that leads to true materialism. The true materialism, which — as Lacan puts it with trenchant directness in another significant passage — can only be a dialectical materialism, is not grounded in the primacy of matter nor in matter as first principle, but in the notion of conflict or contradiction, of split, and of the "parallax of the Real" produced in it. In other words, the fundamental axiom of materialism is not "matter is all" or "matter is primary," but relates rather to the primacy of a cut. And, of course, this is not without consequences for the kind of realism that pertains to this materialism.<sup>8</sup>

From this Lacanian perspective, Zupančič concludes, "The reality of arche-fossils . . . is no different from the reality of objects contemporary with us . . . because neither the former nor the latter are correlates of our thinking, but are instead *objective correlates of the emergence of a break in reality as a homogeneous continuum*."<sup>9</sup> The name for this break in reality, this notion of conflict, contradiction, or split that produces a "parallax of the Real" — a break or split which entails that the proper axiom of materialism is not "material reality is all there is," but rather, as Slavoj Žižek often puts it, invoking the Lacanian logic of sexualization, "material reality is non-all" — is, Zupančič concludes, the subject.<sup>10</sup>

Zupančič waits, however, to develop this point until considerably later in the chapter, in the aforementioned section on Lacan, Deleuze, and the death drive. Though she begins this section by attending to some of the overlooked resonances between Lacan and Deleuze — the most notable of these being that both thinkers reject the typical dualistic understanding of the Freudian drives (according to which Eros and Thanatos, the “life drives” and the death drive, are viewed as competing, opposed principles) and insist instead on “the *primacy of the death drive*” — she concludes it by focusing on the point at which the two are fundamentally incompatible: the question of the subject.<sup>11</sup> As Zupančič explains, “whereas Deleuze’s ‘realism’ implies radical desubjectivation, for Lacan (the effect of) subjectivation is the very instance (or ‘proof’) of an irreducible Real.”<sup>12</sup> In short, the difference between what Deleuze calls “realized Ontology” and what we might call Lacan’s “Real ontology” hinges, above all, on the role that subjectivity plays — or doesn’t play — in each.<sup>13</sup>

If the many “new”/“speculative” materialisms and realisms currently *en vogue* across the humanities (e.g., speculative realism, object-oriented ontology, New Materialism) are any indication, Deleuze’s “realized Ontology” is currently winning the battle for the future of materialism. Whatever the differences between these various materialisms and realisms — and there are indeed differences between them — Zupančič is entirely correct when she claims that all of them share the dual aim of “‘getting out of the subject’ (the supposed discursive or transcendental cage) and . . . ‘getting the subject out’ (of the landscape of new ontologies).”<sup>14</sup> Such being the case, it is no stretch to say that the most fundamental question Zupančič poses throughout this entire chapter, the question whose stakes are the highest — not only for psychoanalysis’ continued relevance to and purchase on future materialist thinking, but, indeed, for the future of materialist thinking in general — is the following one: “Can there be a serious materialism without the subject — that is, without a strong concept of the subject?”<sup>15</sup>

The answer to this question is, quite simply, no. What is not so simple, however, is the reason why this is the case. For starters, as Zupančič points out, the very framing of the debate concerning the role of the subject in materialist philosophy is incorrect, premised on a false opposition. From the Lacanian standpoint, materialism “is precisely not based on the opposition between ‘naked’ reality, stripped of all subjective illusions and investments (reality such as it exists independently of the subject), and an ‘always-already’ subjective/subjectivized (or subject-constituted) reality.”<sup>16</sup> Though Lacanians do indeed hold that “reality as it is

independently of ourselves appears (comes into view) only ‘dependently on us’ *as subjects*,” this is meant “not in the sense of [reality] being caused or constituted by us” — as in, say, Berkeleyan idealism, the (in)famous maxim of which is “*esse est percipi*” — but rather “in the sense that reality’s own inherent negativity/ contradiction appears as part of this reality precisely in the form of the subject.” This is absolutely crucial: the subject is not a mega-actant that posits/constructs material reality; rather, the subject is “an *objective* embodiment of reality’s contradiction,” of the fact that being in-itself is contradictory, riven by antagonism.<sup>17</sup> This is why “the gist of Lacan’s materialism,” as Zupančič articulates it, is as follows:

...of course I am determined, as a subject, by things that exist independently of me; yet the subjective position, or subjectivation, is not only a concrete and singular way in which things determine me, it is also and at the same time the subjectivation of a paradox/contradiction involved in the very things that determine me (this paradox/contradiction exists “in itself” only as this objectivation-subjectivation, or objectivation via the subject).<sup>18</sup>

In short, “we get to certain aspects of objective reality only by insisting on the irreducibility of the subject.”<sup>19</sup>

And this is why, to take object-oriented ontology and New Materialism as prime examples, neither the “hasty, precipitate objectivation of the subject” characteristic of the former, nor the “bracketing” or “eliding” of questions of subjectivity characteristic of the latter, are properly materialist maneuvers.<sup>20</sup> If we could simply “horizontaliz[e] . . . the ontological plane” (as Jane Bennett’s New Materialism aims to do), thereby rendering the subject merely “one object among many others,” one object “*among* the various types of objects that exist or populate the world, each with their own specific powers and capacities” (as Levi Bryant’s object-oriented ontology aims to do), then “there would be no need for the concept of the subject (in the strong philosophical and psychoanalytic sense); the term ‘person’ (or ‘human being’) would suffice.”<sup>21</sup> Hence Žižek’s insistence that what object-oriented ontologists and New Materialists call subject “simply does not meet the criteria of subject.”<sup>22</sup> As Zupančič elaborates, that “the subject names an object that is precisely *not* just an object among others” is “the whole point.” The subject “is not simply an object among many objects, it is also the form of existence of the contradiction, antagonism, at work in the very existence of objects as objects... The subject exists among objects, yet it exists there as the point that gives access to a

possible objectivation of their inner antagonism, its inscription into their reality.” And here we arrive at why the subject is both inextricable from and indispensable to Lacanian materialism: the subject is “not simply the one who thinks,” but who, above all, “makes certain contradictions accessible to thought,” the one through which “these contradictions [in being] appear as a ‘matter of thought.’”<sup>23</sup> Subtract the “matter of thought” that is the subject, and “it is difficult to speak of *materialism*.”<sup>24</sup> Lacanian materialism, then, is “thinking which advances as thinking of contradictions,” and “what makes psychoanalysis a materialist theory (and practice)” is that “it starts by thinking a problem/difficulty/contradiction, not by trying to think the world such as it is independently of the subject.”<sup>25</sup>

To thus reframe the debate: though often mistaken for merely another iteration of correlationism, the Lacanian insistence upon the subject is anything but. For contrary to the correlationist position, Lacan neither places the subject squarely on the side of epistemology nor equates the subject’s ontology, its being, with thinking. Rather, as Zupančič clarifies, the Lacanian subject, as “subject of the unconscious,” is located at — or, more strongly, *functions as* — the “‘short circuit’ of the epistemological and ontological levels (of knowledge and being) in the form of their joint/common negativity (lack of knowledge falls into a lack of being).”<sup>26</sup> In short, the subject stands for the radical negativity, the radical out-of-jointness, of reality (in) itself, the hole in reality that renders being unwhole, disoriented — or, even better, like the topological figures Lacan was so fond of invoking (the torus, Möbius strip, cross-cap, Klein bottle, etc.), non-orientable.<sup>27</sup>

## From Drive to Desire

In a very significant sense, then, the subject is indeed, as the practitioners of the various new/speculative materialisms and realisms addressed above claim, an object. Yet it is a very particular, very peculiar kind of object — a strange object that, insofar as it is in the subject more than the subject itself, is constitutive of subjectivity as such. This object is that which Lacan termed *objet petit a* (object small *a*), the “object-cause of desire,” the “extimate” object-in-subject that operates as an incursion — a “cut,” as Lacan likes to put it — of the Real into the fabric of reality that is nonetheless responsible for maintaining the consistency of reality, a recalcitrant little piece of the Real that resists symbolization/ assimilation into reality yet which for that very reason sets the process of reality’s symbolization in motion.<sup>28</sup>

Given the crucial role that the *objet a* plays in Lacanian ontology, it is somewhat surprising that it is virtually absent from *What Is Sex?* The term appears

only twice in the text — once in the body, once in an endnote — both instances of which occur in the final chapter I have been discussing. I point this out not to critique Zupančič's book, but to use it as an opportunity to delve more deeply into the relation between desire and drive relative to Lacanian ontology and to ask how that relation can be used to further distinguish the object-*dis*oriented ontology of psychoanalytic materialism from the object-oriented ontology of the many aforementioned new/speculative materialisms and realisms. To that end, I would like to bring a third field to bear on philosophy and psychoanalysis, the two fields that ground much of Zupančič's thinking throughout *What Is Sex?* literature.<sup>29</sup>

In "Human, Animal," the second section of "Object-Disoriented Ontology," Zupančič cites the following lines from one of Hamlet's many famous soliloquies:

To die, to sleep —  
 No more, and by a sleep to say we end  
 The heartache and the thousand natural shocks  
 That flesh is heir to — 'tis a consummation  
 Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep.  
 To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub,  
 For in that sleep of death what dreams may come  
 When we have shuffled off this mortal coil  
 Must give us pause. There's the respect  
 That makes calamity of so long life.<sup>30</sup>

As Zupančič glosses this passage:

What constitutes the problem, makes us twitch and hesitate, is not (the thought of) death, but (the thought of) that which — in the same way as it haunts us in the sleep of life — might haunt us in our sleep of death. What scares us is that even in the sleep of death something might come and disturb us, haunt us, and would not let us (not) be.<sup>31</sup>

This, of course, is the position in which Hamlet's father, the Ghost, finds himself as a result of being murdered "in the blossoms of [his] sin," with "No reck'ning made" and thus "With all [his] imperfections on [his] head."<sup>32</sup> As he tells Hamlet, not only is he "Doomed for a certain term to walk the night," but, what is worse, he is also doomed to spend his days "confined to fast in fires / Till the foul crimes done in [his] days of

nature / Are burnt and purged away” — a suffering that, could the “lightest word” of it be told to Hamlet, “Would harrow up [his] soul, freeze [his] young blood, / Make [his] two eyes like stars start from their spheres, / [His] knotty and combined locks to part, / And each particular hair to stand on end / Like quills upon the fretful porcupine.”<sup>33</sup> This “undead” status of Hamlet’s father brings Zupančič to the death drive, a concept, she explains, which, contrary to the superficial understanding of it, “is not so much something that aims at death as a strange deviation from the supposed homeostasis of death itself.”<sup>34</sup> Yet we might recall that in Seminar VI, *Le désir et son interprétation*, Lacan reads *Hamlet* as a tragedy not of drive, but of desire.<sup>35</sup>

In this early excursion into the nature of what, at this point in his thinking, Lacan characterized as the “object *in* desire” (it wouldn’t become the “object-cause of desire” until later on), the *objet a* is that which “takes the place . . . of what the subject is — symbolically — deprived of[.] . . . [t]he phallus; and it is from the phallus that the object gets its function in the fantasy, and from the phallus that desire is constituted with the fantasy as its reference.”<sup>36</sup> As he continues, “Something becomes an object in desire when it takes the place of what by its very nature remains concealed from the subject: that self-sacrifice, that pound of flesh which is mortgaged [*engagé*] in his relationship to the signifier.”<sup>37</sup> In the case of Hamlet, the *objet a*, one that he both desublimates and resublimates over the course of the play, is Ophelia — a point no better exemplified than by Lacan’s admittedly “gross” pun that “Ophelia is *O phallos*.”<sup>38</sup> Yet what gives rise to the need for the (fantasmatic) phallic substitute in the first place is the (symbolic) loss of the phallus termed castration.

While there is a good deal to be said about the functioning of the phallus throughout *Hamlet* — and, indeed, Lacan himself says quite a bit about it, with regard not only to Ophelia, but to Claudius and Gertrude as well — when it comes to castration an even better tragedy of desire is Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*. Having on a previous voyage been “dismasted” by the legendary White Whale, the eponymous Moby Dick, the monomaniacal Captain Ahab dedicates his entire life to the quest for vengeance against (in the words of Starbuck, the Pequod’s first mate) the “dumb brute.”<sup>39</sup> Yet, that Moby Dick is for Ahab not merely a dumb brute, “a dumb thing” that “smote [him] from blindest instinct” (to again quote Starbuck), but is, rather, a “monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them, till they are left living on with half a heart and half a lung,” is precisely why he is so madly pledged to chase him “round Good Hope, and round



the Horn, and round the Norway Maelstrom, and round perdition's flames . . . till he spouts black blood and rolls fin out."<sup>40</sup>

As these passages suggest, Ahab, as I have discussed elsewhere, provides a textbook illustration of the logic of sublimation, whereby, as Lacan defines it in Seminar VII, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, one "raises an object . . . to the dignity of the Thing."<sup>41</sup> Ahab's anamorphic projection of an "inscrutable malice," an "intangible malignity," onto Moby Dick elevates what to Starbuck is merely "a dumb thing" to the dignity of the Thing.<sup>42</sup> To be sure, Moby Dick is indeed sublime in the standard Burkean and Kantian senses of the term. Yet, for Ahab he is sublime not on account of his snow white grandeur, but on account of the unfathomable, intangible something he sees in him (his "inscrutable malice") as a result of a gaze distorted by desire, jaundiced by hatred.<sup>43</sup> Here, however, in light of Zupančič's focus on the death drive throughout "Object-Disoriented Ontology," I would like to focus on a different object born of Ahab's desire, one born not, as in the case of Moby Dick's "intangible malignity," of Ahab's oft-remarked monomaniacal desire — a form of desire that, insofar as it is "object-oriented," Kant would deem "pathological" — but of what Lacan, in his discussion of *Antigone* in Seminar VII, terms "pure desire," that form of desire which, as Zupančič argues in *Ethics of the Real*, leads us "beyond desire" into the realm of the drive.<sup>44</sup> That object is Fedallah, the Mephistophelean leader of Ahab's mysterious crew of Parsee stowaways.

As Leslie Fiedler long ago pointed out in his *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Ahab's relationship with Fedallah can best be characterized as an American version of the "Faustian bargain" in which Fedallah "plays Satan to Ahab's Faust."<sup>45</sup> Much is made about Fedallah's supposedly diabolical nature throughout the novel. Consider, for instance, the following discussion between Stubb and Flask — the Pequod's second and third mates, respectively — concerning "that gamboge ghost of a Fedallah" (as Flask refers to him). In response to Flask's concern that Fedallah will "charm the ship to no good at last," Stubb replies:

Flask, I take that Fedallah to be the devil in disguise. Do you believe that cock and bull story about his having been stowed away on board ship? He's the devil, I say. The reason why you don't see his tail, is because he tucks it up out of sight; he carries it coiled away in his pocket, I guess.<sup>46</sup>

As if to lend further credence to these conjectures, Ishmael concludes the chapter with the following tableau of Fedallah inspecting the head of a right whale the crew has killed and hoisted alongside the ship:

Fedallah was calmly eyeing the right whale's head, and ever and anon glancing from the deep wrinkles there to the lines in his own hand. And Ahab chanced so to stand, that the Parsee occupied his shadow; while, if the Parsee's shadow was there at all it seemed only to blend with it, and lengthen Ahab's.<sup>47</sup>

Passages such as these, of which there are many more throughout the novel, speak to Fiedler's point that "the whole relationship of Ahab to Fedallah is rendered in precisely so artificial and unconvincing a mode" — a result of Melville's reliance on "the cheapjack machinery of the gothic novel" — that the "modern reader" is tempted to read it as an attempt by Melville to "undercut ironically the whole Faustian myth."<sup>48</sup> And yet, as Fiedler is nonetheless forced to query, if this is indeed the case, if we are indeed to take Ahab's Faustian bargain with Fedallah only half-seriously, then "why is Fedallah in the action to begin with, and why do his Macbethian predictions" — namely, that before Ahab can die, "two hearses must verily be seen by [him] on the sea," the first "not made by mortal hands," the second made of wood "grown in America"; that "neither hearse nor coffin can be [Ahab's]," for "hemp only can kill [him]"; and, finally, that he, Fedallah, Ahab's "pilot," must die before him — "so precisely and tantalizingly come true?"<sup>49</sup>

The more proper question to ask, however, is not *why* Fedallah is in the action to begin with, but rather *how* he comes to be in it. Stubb may encourage his men to "never mind from where" Fedallah and his fellow "brimstone . . . devils" came, but as Ishmael tells us, "all manner of wild conjectures" and "Laplandish speculations" persist among the crew concerning the nature of these "outlandish strangers," especially as regards "dark Ahab's precise agency in the matter."<sup>50</sup> It won't do to say that, like Moby Dick's malignity, the diabolical Fedallah is an anamorphic stain, a specter born of a desiring gaze that, to invoke the most famous of literary anamorphoses, Queen Isabel's "looking awry" upon King Richard's departure in *Richard II*, generates "naught but shadows / Of what is not."<sup>51</sup> On the contrary, Fedallah and the rest of Ahab's "tiger-yellow crew" of stowaways really do exist.<sup>52</sup> When, before setting sail, the "cracked" prophet Elijah asks Ishmael whether he saw "anything looking like men going towards th[e] ship a while ago," Ishmael answers,

“Yes, I thought I did see four or five men; but it was too dim to be sure.”<sup>53</sup> Reflecting further on the incident, Ishmael confesses that he “would have thought [him]self to have been optically deceived in the matter, were it not for Elijah’s otherwise inexplicable question.”<sup>54</sup> Though Ishmael “beat[s] the thing down” for the time being, it returns in chapter 43, “Hark!” — one of a handful of chapters from which Ishmael, notably, is entirely absent — in which a minor character named Archy tells another minor character, Cabaco, that he thinks he hears a cough in the hold of the ship, adding that he heard Stubb and Flask talking about “something of that sort” on a previous morning watch.<sup>55</sup>

And yet, for all this empirical evidence of Fedallah and company’s existence prior to their first full-fledged appearance in chapter 48, “The First Lowering,” neither will it do to simply dismiss Stubb’s dismissal of the stowaway explanation as a “cock and bull story” — a dismissal that hinges on his conviction that Fedallah is the (proverbially Faustian) “devil in disguise.” From this perspective, perhaps the most crucial passage with regard to how Fedallah came to be is the following one, in which Ishmael describes Ahab’s nightly outbursts from his cabin:

Often, when forced from his hammock by exhausting and intolerably vivid dreams of the night, which, resuming his own intense thoughts through the day, carried them on amid a clashing of phrensies, and whirled them round and round in his blazing brain, till the very throbbing of his life-spot became insufferable anguish; and when, as was sometimes the case, these spiritual throes in him heaved his being up from its base, and a chasm seemed opening to him, from which forked flames and lightnings shot up, and accursed fiends beckoned him to leap down among them; when this hell in himself yawned beneath him, a wild cry would be heard through the ship; and with glaring eyes Ahab would burst from his state room, as though escaping from a bed that was on fire. Yet these, perhaps, instead of being the unsuppressable symptoms of some latent weakness, or fright at his own resolve, were but the plainest tokens of its intensity. For, at such times, crazy Ahab, the scheming, unappeasedly steadfast hunter of the white whale; this Ahab that had gone to his hammock, was not the agent that so caused him to burst from it in horror again. The latter was the eternal, living principle or soul in him; and in sleep, being for the time dissociated from the characterizing mind, which at other times employed it for its outer vehicle or agent, it spontaneously sought escape from the scorching contiguity of the frantic

thing, of which, for the time, it was no longer an integral. But as the mind does not exist unless leagued with the soul, therefore it must have been that, in Ahab's case, yielding up all his thoughts and fancies to his one supreme purpose; that purpose, by its own sheer inveteracy of will, forced itself against gods and devils into a kind of self-assumed, independent being of its own. Nay, could grimly live and burn, while the common vitality to which it was conjoined, fled horror-stricken from the unbidden and unfathered birth. Therefore, the tormented spirit that glared out of bodily eyes, when what seemed Ahab rushed from his room, was for the time but a vacated thing, a formless somnambulistic being, a ray of living light, to be sure, but without an object to color, and therefore a blankness in itself. God help thee, old man, thy thoughts have created a creature in thee; and he whose intense thinking thus makes him a Prometheus; a vulture feeds upon that heart for ever; that vulture the very creature he creates.<sup>56</sup>

This passage entirely justifies the crew's engagement in "wild conjectures as to dark Ahab's precise agency in the matter," for it depicts how Fedallah, as Sharon Cameron wonderfully puts it, is a being born "out of Ahab's mind," a man "birthed in Ahab's dreams and seen by the eyes of the Pequod's crew."<sup>57</sup> Yet he is a being born not of Ahab's conscious, "characterizing mind," but of his unconscious. For in an inversion of Hamlet's fear of what hellish dreams may come after death, Melville here shows us what hellish figures may come of dreams generated by the death drive.

What is crucial to note here is that this scene of Fedallah's genesis out of Ahab's dreams in no way conflicts with the fact that he and his fellow "dusky phantoms" existed *prior to* them.<sup>58</sup> As discussed above, with Fedallah and company's first definitive appearance in "The First Lowering," we learn that Ishmael (and Elijah) *did*, in fact, see them boarding the ship, that Archy *did*, in fact, hear them in the hold. From the literary perspective, these incidents are, of course, instances of foreshadowing. From the psychoanalytic perspective, however — especially a *materialist* psychoanalytic perspective — Ahab's dream, which comes a mere three chapters before Fedallah and his cohort first appear, is far more important, for it functions as a key instance of *Nachträglichkeit*, of "afterwardsness," in which Fedallah's birth, paradoxically, occurs retroactively, after the fact.<sup>59</sup> To again invoke Hamlet, with respect to Fedallah's birth — his causation, as it were — "The time is out of joint."<sup>60</sup> And this "unbidden and unfathered birth," this creation of Fedallah *ex nihilo* out of Ahab's dreams, is precisely the type of being for which a "flat," "horizontal"

ontology — one in which not only are subjects merely one type of object among many other objects (which, as addressed earlier, amounts to a subjectless ontology), but so too are all objects (including subjects) entirely “withdrawn” from one another — simply cannot account.<sup>61</sup> Though not a Lacanian, the aforementioned Cameron provides an uncannily Lacanian analysis of the extimate nature of Fedallah when she writes that “Melville means us to see [Fedallah] as problematically at once inside and outside of [Ahab],” “that part of himself which exists outside himself.”<sup>62</sup> Only a materialism that understands Fedallah as an object dialectically begotten by the pure desire of the subject of the unconscious — “pure” being the operative word here — can properly account for his extimate, Möbial nature.

### From Desire to Drive

As mentioned above, *What Is Sex?* is more concerned with drive than desire, the difference between these concepts having garnered much Lacanian ink. Todd McGowan best represents the distinction commonly drawn between the two when he explains that whereas “desire is predicated on the belief that it is possible to regain the lost object and thereby discover the ultimate enjoyment,” drive “locates enjoyment in the movement of return itself — the repetition of loss, rather than in what might be recovered.”<sup>63</sup> In short, in contrast to desire, the drive, as Zupančič herself puts it in *Ethics of the Real*, “attain[s] its satisfaction without attaining its goal.”<sup>64</sup> And yet, as Zupančič elaborates, even if desire and drive share no “common measure,” no common aim or goal, one cannot “arrive at the drive” without “pass[ing] through desire and insist[ing] on it until the very end,” for it is only by “follow[ing] the ‘logic’ of desire to its limit” that “a possible passage opens up towards the drive.”<sup>65</sup> To insist on desire until the very end, until we reach its limit — another way of articulating what Lacan ultimately claims is the “ethics of psychoanalysis,” to not give ground relative to one’s desire — is to arrive at “pure desire,” desire purified of any object, any pathological content.<sup>66</sup> Pure desire opens up a path to the drive because, as Lacan stresses in Seminar XI, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, “As far as the object in the drive is concerned, . . . it is, strictly speaking, of no importance. It is a matter of total indifference.”<sup>67</sup> The drive may be said to have an aim, a goal — namely, its own satisfaction — but it is not, strictly speaking, object-oriented. Another way of putting this would be to say that there is no object of the drive, only objects generated by the drive — the partial objects (gaze, voice, breast, phallus, feces) that Lacan identified as *objets petit a* — and these extimate objects, once again, are precisely those for which the flat, subjectless ontologies of the

avowedly “non-dialectical” new/speculative materialisms and realisms addressed above cannot account.<sup>68</sup>

Instructive here is the concept of “perversity” theorized by Melville’s contemporary, Edgar Allan Poe. As defined in “The Imp of the Perverse,” perversity is “an innate and primitive impulse of human action,” “a radical, a primitive impulse, elementary.”<sup>69</sup> We find a similar definition in another of Poe’s tales of perversity, “The Black Cat,” wherein perversity is said to be “one of the primitive impulses of the human heart — one of the indivisible primary faculties, or sentiments, which give direction to the character of Man.”<sup>70</sup> Perversity is “radical” in a dual sense: it is not only “a *mobile* without motive — a motive not *motivirt*,” an impulse “[t]hrough [whose] promptings we act without comprehensible object,” but also a “strongly antagonistical sentiment” that “arouse[s]” not a “desire to be well,” but an “unfathomable longing of the soul *to vex itself* — to offer violence to its own nature,” an “anomalous feeling” which, “were it not occasionally known to operate in furtherance of good, we might deem . . . a direct instigation of the Arch-fiend.”<sup>71</sup> “Nor,” Poe’s narrator concludes, “will this overwhelming tendency . . . admit of analysis, or resolution into ulterior elements,” for “[b]eyond or behind this [‘spirit of the *Perverse*] there is no principle that men, in their fleshly nature, can understand.”<sup>72</sup>

Consult *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and you will see just how uncannily Poe anticipates Freud — or just how uncannily Freud, in this discourse on the compulsion to repeat, repeats Poe. Consider, for instance, Freud’s definition of the death drive as “a compulsion to repeat . . . more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than the pleasure principle” and the “self-preservative instincts,” both of which it “over-rides” and “act[s] in opposition to,” thereby “giv[ing] the appearance of some ‘daemonic’ force at work,” the “hint of possession by some ‘daemonic’ power.”<sup>73</sup> Were one to silently insert these passages into Poe’s tales of perversity — or vice versa — readers would be hard-pressed to notice the interpolation. And yet, anticipating Lacan, Poe at the same time goes *beyond* Freud, for in the figure of the imp of the perverse — “a dusky, fiendish, and filmy figure” with “a shrill-sounding and phantom voice,” as the eponymous hero of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* describes the imp of the perverse that, in one of the most harrowing scenes of the novel, beckons him to achieve “ultimate escape” by releasing his hold of the rocks to which he desperately clings while dangling over the edge of a precipice — Poe materializes — that is, objectivizes — the “‘daemonic’ force” produced by the drive.<sup>74</sup> Melville’s Fedallah is one of these imps of the perverse, an “accursed fiend” born of the hellish “chasm” opened in Ahab by the “nightmare of the soul” that is the death

drive.<sup>75</sup> In “heav[ing Ahab’s] being up from its base,” the death drive gives birth to an altogether different sort of being, an extimate object-in-subject whose existence, insofar as it lies not only beyond the pleasure principle, but beyond the reality principle as well, rends reality, rendering it not-all, incomplete.

It is in this shift of focus from Moby Dick as the impossible object-cause of Ahab’s monomaniacal desire to Fedallah as the excessive, excremental object produced by the pure desire of the drive that we can come to understand what Zupančič (again in *Ethics of the Real*) identifies as the change that “the ‘ontological’ status of enjoyment underwent” in the later Lacan.<sup>76</sup> Whereas for the earlier Lacan — the Lacan who reads *Hamlet* in Seminar VI, for instance — the trouble with *jouissance* is that it does not exist, is unattainable, always eludes our grasp,<sup>77</sup> for the later Lacan, the trouble with *jouissance*, as Žižek explains, is that “one *can never get rid of it*, that its stain drags along for ever.”<sup>78</sup> Yet, as the impish Fedallah demonstrates, it is less the case that this stain is forever dragged along by the subject than that the subject is forever dragged along by this stain. And it is in this precise sense that Fedallah is Ahab’s “pilot.” Moby Dick’s intangible malignity may be the object-cause of desire that sets Ahab down the “iron way,” but Fedallah is the *jouissance* of the drive that fuels the train’s engine.<sup>79</sup>

This is why all of Ahab’s dreams of throwing off his “[c]ursed . . . mortal inter-debtedness” — be it his indebtedness to the crew on which he is forced to rely in order to exact his revenge (including the “blockhead” of a carpenter to whom he is beholden to make him a new ivory leg after his first one shatters), or his indebtedness to his own body (“I would be free as air; and I’m down in the whole world’s books. I am so rich, I could have given bid for bid with the wealthiest Praetorians at the auction of the Roman empire . . . and yet I owe for the flesh in the tongue I brag with”) — are just as foolhardy as his quest for Moby Dick.<sup>80</sup> Even were he to “get a crucible, and into it, and dissolve [him]self down to one small compendious vertebra,” Ahab, to channel Father Mapple, would still be unable to “stand[ ] forth his own inexorable self” because his self is inexorably, inextricably linked to and dependent on the *jouissance* that is its extimate, objectal correlative.<sup>81</sup> Hence Zupančič’s characterization of the drive in much the same terms used to characterize Fedallah’s extimate nature above, as “a moment of torsion or of incurving which might be compared to that of a Möbius strip: if we persist in moving on one of its sides, we will suddenly find ourselves on the ‘other’ side.”<sup>82</sup>

And this, finally, is why Ahab is perhaps *the* literary figure to consider in light of the new/speculative materialist/realist attempt to both “get out of the subject” and

“get the subject out” of ontology — an attempt that has been making considerable headway in literary studies of late. To take Bennett’s New Materialism as a case in point, in the introduction to *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett explains that her decision to “elide the rich and diverse literature on subjectivity and its genesis, its conditions of possibility, and its boundaries” has in large part to do with her belief that “[t]he philosophical project of naming where subjectivity begins and ends is too often bound up with fantasies of a human uniqueness in the eyes of God, of escape from materiality, or of mastery of nature; and even where it is not, it remains an aporetic or quixotic endeavor.” To this she adds that it is her “hunch that the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption.”<sup>83</sup> It is thus against this thoroughly anthropocentric *Weltanschauung* that Bennett champions a “thing-power” materialism, one she hopes will lead to “revisions in operative notions of matter, life, self-interest, will, and agency.”<sup>84</sup> From the perspective of a Lacanian dialectical materialism, however, the beauty of Melville’s self-professed King Ahab is that, though he embodies all of these characteristics — the hubris, the self-interest, the inveterate will, the fantasies of mastery, conquest, and consumption of nature and all its beings — he nonetheless ends up demonstrating the lesson that Hamlet already knows: that “The King is a thing.”<sup>85</sup> Indeed, for all that has been made of Ahab as exemplar of Emersonian self-reliance run amok, of a totalitarian will to power,<sup>86</sup> what he ultimately exemplifies is the subject not as mega-actant but, to cite one of Žižek’s best definitions of the death drive, as “constituted through his own division, splitting, as to the object in him,” an object that stands for “the dimension of . . . ‘death drive,’ of a traumatic imbalance, a rooting out” that renders “Man as such . . . ‘nature sick unto death,’ derailed, run off the rails through fascination with a lethal Thing.”<sup>87</sup> Not only would one be hard-pressed to formulate a better characterization of Ahab, a man of “iron soul” whose “path to [his] fixed purpose is laid with iron rails,” but so too would one be hard-pressed to formulate a better answer as to why there can be no “thing-power,” no vibrant matter, without the subject.<sup>88</sup>

To thus finally return to *What Is Sex?*, what is at stake in this excursion into the literary is Zupančič’s fundamental point that, however “fine-sounding” the “self-limiting modesty” of theses regarding the “democracy of objects” or the “vibrancy of matter” might be, such positions, in eliding or demoting the subject in the name of accessing reality “in itself,” “actually (and quite ‘subjectively’) obfuscat[e] reality ‘such as it is’: antagonistic,” distorted, excessive.<sup>89</sup> If the character of Fedallah, the surplus-enjoyment (*plus-de-jouir*) born of the death drive, demonstrates nothing else, it is that



“reality appears with an irreducible excess ‘over’ itself,” an excess that renders it ontologically incomplete, contradictory, impossible; and this excess is the subject.<sup>90</sup> Hence Zupančič’s conclusion that the lesson of Lacan’s Real ontology — a lesson sorely needed today, not only in philosophy, but in literary and cultural studies as well — is that “if we cannot think something without a contradiction, we should not take a step back from this impossibility (recognizing and accepting it as impossibility, or inaccessibility to thought); instead, and on the contrary, we have to take this contradiction and impossibility *as the very Real which IS accessible to thought*.”<sup>91</sup> Above all else, it is this insistence on (the possibility of) thinking the impossible — a thinking which, as noted above, constitutes what for Zupančič is the most elementary definition of materialism: “thinking which advances as thinking of contradictions” — that renders *What Is Sex?*, especially at this particular moment of return to ontology, such an indispensable book.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Though Meillassoux is often considered the leader of “speculative realism,” the term was actually coined by Ray Brassier. What’s more, throughout *After Finitude* (and elsewhere), Meillassoux characterizes his philosophical project as “speculative materialism” rather than speculative realism. See Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (New York: Continuum, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 5.

<sup>3</sup> Important to note here is that Meillassoux’s notion of the arche-fossil — what he more broadly calls “ancestrality” — is somewhat more complex than I have space to address here, as it concerns not just prehistoric fossils themselves but also, and perhaps more crucially, scientific “ancestral statements” about the earth’s prehuman history (such as “Dinosaurs existed 65 million years ago”), as well as the earth’s own prehistory (such as “The earth was formed 4.56 billion years ago”). As Zupančič points out, for Meillassoux, ancestral statements such as these pose an “insoluble problem” for the correlationist insofar as they posit a world “anterior to the emergence of thought, and even of life” — anterior, that is, “to every form of human *relation* to that world.” Alenka Zupančič, *What Is Sex?* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 74.

<sup>4</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 7.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 124. That Meillassoux’s turn of phrase has gained considerable currency since the publication of *After Finitude* is attested by the title of the recently published collection *The Kantian Catastrophe? Conversations on Finitude and the Limits of Philosophy*, ed. Anthony Morgan (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bigg Books, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Zupančič, *What Is Sex?*, 76–77. Zupančič expresses astonishment at “how little time Meillassoux devotes to the discussion of modern science, its fundamental, or inaugural gesture, its

presuppositions and consequences — that is to say, to the discussion of what science is actually doing” (77).

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XVI: D'un Autre à l'autre, 1968–1969*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 2006), 33; Zupančič's translation.

<sup>8</sup> Zupančič, *What Is Sex?*, 78. The passage of Lacan's to which Zupančič here alludes is the following one from Seminar XVIII:

If I am anything, it is clear that I'm not a nominalist. . . . If we are nominalists, we must completely renounce dialectical materialism, so that, in short, the nominalist tradition, which is strictly speaking the only danger of idealism that can occur in a discourse like mine, is quite obviously ruled out. This is not about being realist in the sense one was realist in the Middle Ages, that is in the sense of the realism of the universals; what is at stake is to mark off the fact that our discourse, our scientific discourse, finds the Real only in that it depends on the function of the semblance.

Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XVIII: D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant, 1971*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 2006), 28; Zupančič's translation.

<sup>9</sup> Zupančič, *What Is Sex?*, 83.

<sup>10</sup> For just one of many instances in which he articulates the Lacanian mantra “material reality is non-all,” see Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (New York: Verso, 2012), 742.

<sup>11</sup> Zupančič, *What Is Sex?*, 110.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>13</sup> As Deleuze asserts in *Difference and Repetition*, “the only realised Ontology — in other words, the univocity of being — is repetition.” Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 303. This line alone, in its equation of ontology as such with repetition, suggests why Deleuze echoed Lacan in granting priority to the death drive.

<sup>14</sup> Zupančič, *What Is Sex?*, 119. As Zupančič points out, many of these new/speculative materialisms and realisms are explicitly “based upon Deleuzian foundations” (119) — though, in fairness to Deleuze, she is careful to add that these materialisms and realisms “very often . . . do not come even close to the complexity of Deleuzian philosophy” (150n26).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 122. My claim that New Materialism brackets and elides questions of subjectivity refers to the following line from Jane Bennett's New Materialist manifesto, *Vibrant Matter*: “To attempt, as I do, to present human and nonhuman actants on a less vertical plane than is common is to bracket the question of the human and to elide the rich and diverse literature on subjectivity and its genesis, its conditions of possibility, and its boundaries.” Here we come to the fundamental disagreement between Bennett's (neo)vitalist materialism and psychoanalytic materialism. Whereas the (neo)vital materialist elides the issue of subjectivity because, as Bennett claims, “the philosophical project of

naming where subjectivity begins and ends is too often bound up with fantasies of . . . escape from materiality," the Lacanian materialist maintains that eliding subjectivity is itself the greatest fantasy of escape from materiality. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), ix.

<sup>21</sup> Jane Bennett, "Systems and Things: On Vital Materialism and Object-Oriented Ontology," in *The Nonhuman Turn*, ed. Richard Grusin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 230; Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2011), 22, 20; Zupančič, *What Is Sex?*, 122.

<sup>22</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Disparities* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 83. In this regard, objectivizing the subject and eliding the issue of subjectivity are one and the same thing.

<sup>23</sup> Zupančič, *What Is Sex?*, 122. That the Lacanian subject isn't "simply the one who thinks" is a point no better exemplified than by Lacan's famous inversion of Descartes's *cogito ergo sum*: "I am thinking where I am not, therefore I am where I am not thinking." Jacques Lacan, "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud," in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), 430. As Nathan Gorelick explains with regard to this line of Lacan's, "The subject . . . names not a plenitude of thinking over and against other forms of being, but an epistemological impasse resulting from the encounter with the ontological negativity of sex. Human exceptionalism does not follow from this but is in fact animated by its disavowal. Exceptionalism, in other words, is a symptom." Nathan Gorelick, "Why Sex Is Special: Psychoanalysis against New Materialism," in *Subject Lessons: Hegel, Lacan, and the Future of Materialism*, ed. Russell Sbriglia and Slavoj Žižek (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>24</sup> Zupančič, *What Is Sex?*, 122–23.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 123. Joan Copjec, in what can be considered a preemptive strike against Meillassoux's critique of correlationism — a rejoinder *avant la lettre*, as it were — makes a similar point when, in discussing Lacan's radicalization of Freud's theory of sexuality, she asserts:

At the core of this matter of the unforgettable but forever lost Thing, we find not just *an impossibility of thought*, but *a void of Being*. The problem is not simply that I cannot think the primordial mother, but that her loss opens up a hole in being. Or, it is not that the mother escapes representation or thought, but that the *jouissance* that attached me to her has been lost and this loss depletes the whole of my being. But why continue to insist on the unforgettability of the Thing or lost *jouissance*? If we must not forget this *jouissance* that stays together as a whole, it must be because some trace of it [the *objet a*] remains behind even if the nature of that trace must be reconceived.

Joan Copjec, *Imagine There's No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 35–36.

<sup>27</sup> Though he articulates it slightly differently, Žižek makes precisely this point a number of times throughout *Less Than Nothing*. See, for instance, 377, 498–99, 665, 845–46, and 958.

<sup>28</sup> As Lacan puts it in Seminar VI, the subject "encounters" itself "as a cut," and this cut "shows us its form" in the *objet petit a*: "*C'est comme coupure . . . que le sujet se rencontre au point terme de son interrogation. Aussi bien, c'est essentiellement comme forme de coupure que le [objet petit] a, dans*

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*toute sa généralité, nous montre sa forme.*" Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre VI: Le désir et son interprétation, 1958–1959*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Martinière, 2013), 451–52.

<sup>28</sup> Zupančič herself has added literature to the equation before, most notably in her *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan* (New York: Verso, 2000). See, in particular, chapters six and eight, "The Act and Evil in Literature" (on

Laclos's *Le Liasons dangereuses* and Molière's *Dom Juan*) and "Ethics and Tragedy in Psychoanalysis" (on Sophocles, Shakespeare, and Paul Claudel).

<sup>29</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, and Katherine Eisaman Maus (New York: Norton, 1997), 3.1.62–71.

<sup>30</sup> Zupančič, *What Is Sex?*, 91.

<sup>31</sup> Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 1.5.76, 78, 79.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.5.10, 11–13, 21, 15, 16–20.

<sup>33</sup> Zupančič, *What Is Sex?*, 91.

<sup>34</sup> As Lacan asserts at the outset of the lesson of April 29, 1959, "Phallophony," "The tragedy *Hamlet* is the tragedy of desire." Jacques Lacan, "Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*," trans. James Hulbert, in *Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading — Otherwise*, ed. Shoshana Felman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 39. For a brilliant, albeit brief, reading of *Hamlet* by Zupančič— especially of the reason for Hamlet's indecision regarding the killing of Claudius — see her *Ethics of the Real*, 182–85.

<sup>35</sup> Lacan, "Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*," 28, 15. Here, it is important to emphasize that, for Lacan, the phallus is not the missing object whose obtainment would bring complete satisfaction; rather, the phallus is the *signifier* of the primordial lack in being. This is why Lacan emphasizes the word "symbolically" in this quote, setting it off with em dashes as opposed to commas. As Lacan explains later in the seminar, "through his relationship to the signifier, the subject is deprived of something of himself, of his very life, which has assumed the value of that which binds him to the signifier. The phallus is our term for the signifier of his alienation in signification. When the subject is deprived of this signifier, a particular object becomes for him an object of desire. This is the meaning of  $\$ \diamond a$ " (28).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 20. As Lacan points out, though Hamlet, in his first *tête-à-tête* with Ophelia to which we (and the spying Claudius and Polonius) are privy, desublimates Ophelia ("You should not have believed me. . . . / I loved you not" [3.1.18–20]), he later, during her burial, resublimates her ("I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers / Could not, with all their quantity of love, / Make up my sum" [5.1.254–56]). This resublimation not only illustrates Lacan's point that, with regard to Woman, it is only after she is dead, after she has literally become an impossible object, that she truly becomes the object-cause of desire; it also, insofar as it is triggered by Hamlet's witnessing of (and subsequent attempt to outdo) Laertes's mourning for Ophelia, quite literally illustrates Lacan's claim that "desire is the desire of the Other."

<sup>38</sup> Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, ed. Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker (New York: Norton, 1967), 143, 144.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 144, 160, 143.

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<sup>41</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1992), 112. See Russell Sbriglia, “From Sublimity to Sublimation: Hegel, Lacan, Melville,” in *Subject Lessons* (forthcoming).

<sup>42</sup> Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 144, 160, 144.

<sup>43</sup> As Ahab confesses with regard to Moby Dick’s malice/malignity, “That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate.” Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 144.

<sup>44</sup> Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real*, 231. As Lacan explains, though there is “nothing Dionysiac about the act and countenance of Antigone,” she nonetheless “pushes to the limit the realization of something that might be called the pure and simple desire of death as such.” Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 282.

<sup>45</sup> Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Stein and Day, 1966), 453, 141.

<sup>46</sup> Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 275.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

<sup>48</sup> Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, 378, 27, 380.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 380; Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 410–11.

<sup>50</sup> Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 188, 189, 278, 189. As Ishmael notes, though the “subordinate phantoms” of Fedallah’s cohort “soon found their place among the crew,” Fedallah “remained a muffled mystery to the last”: “Whence he came in a mannerly world like this, by what sort of unaccountable tie he soon evinced himself to be linked with Ahab’s peculiar fortunes; nay, so far as to have some sort of a half-hinted influence; Heaven knows, but it might have been even authority over him; all this none knew” (199).

<sup>51</sup> Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of King Richard the Second*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 2.2.21, 23–24.

<sup>52</sup> Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 192, 189.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 92, 170–71.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 174–75.

<sup>57</sup> Sharon Cameron, *The Corporeal Self: Allegories of the Body in Melville and Hawthorne* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 65, 41.

<sup>58</sup> Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 187.

<sup>59</sup> Instructive here is Copjec, who emphasizes the death drive’s “backward trajectory,” its “aim[ing] at the past, at a time *before* the subject found itself where it is now, imbedded in time and moving toward death.” Copjec, *Imagine There’s No Woman*, 33.

<sup>60</sup> Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 1.5.189.

<sup>61</sup> The notions of “flat” and “horizontal” ontology — both of which have been adopted (and used fairly interchangeably) by New Materialists and object-oriented ontologists — come from Bruno Latour and Manuel DeLanda, respectively. See Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); and DeLanda, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy* (New York: Continuum, 2002). The notion of the “withdrawn” nature of objects — withdrawn, so the argument goes, because all objects are non-relational, hermetically sealed off from one another — comes from Graham Harman. See Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002).

<sup>62</sup> Cameron, *The Corporeal Self*, 54.

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<sup>63</sup> Todd McGowan, *Out of Time: Desire in Atemporal Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 11. See also Adrian Johnston: “[D]rives come to enjoy the very failure to reach the impossible goal, whereas desire is permanently dissatisfied with the inaccessibility of its goal.” Adrian Johnston, *Time Driven: Metapsychology and the Splitting of the Drive* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 372.

<sup>64</sup> Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real*, 242.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 243, 239, 243.

<sup>66</sup> “I propose then that, from an analytical point of view, the only thing of which one can be guilty is of having given ground relative to one’s desire.” Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 319.

<sup>67</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, 1963–1964*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1978), 168.

<sup>68</sup> See Pheng Cheah, “Non-Dialectical Materialism,” in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, ed. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 70–91.

<sup>69</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, *The Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. G. R. Thompson (New York: Norton, 2004), 403.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 350.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 403, 350, 405.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 405.

<sup>73</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961), 25, 46, 25, 41, 43.

<sup>74</sup> Poe, *Selected Writings*, 554, 553. Another way in which Poe anticipates Lacan is in claiming that perversity, like the drive, does not “admit of analysis.” As Lacan argues in Seminar XI: “after the mapping of the subject in relation to the [*objet*] *a*, the experience of the fundamental phantasy becomes the drive. What, then, does he who has passed through the experience of this opaque relation to the origin, to the drive, become? How can a subject who has traversed the radical phantasy experience the drive? This is the beyond of analysis, and has never been approached.” Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 273.

<sup>75</sup> The phrase “nightmare of the soul” comes from the narrator of “The Imp of the Perverse,” who uses it to characterize the particular “fit[ ] of Perversity” by which he is seized; Poe, *Selected Writings*, 406. In a further solidification of the link between Fedallah and company and the imps of the perverse that appear in both “The Imp of the Perverse” and *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, Ishmael, in the lengthy passage quoted above, describes the “accursed fiends” that populate the hellish “chasm” opened in Ahab as “beckon[ing] him to leap down among them.”

<sup>76</sup> Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real*, 239.

<sup>77</sup> This point is no better exemplified than by Lacan’s concluding remarks on *Hamlet* in Seminar VI, in which, citing Hamlet’s announcement (to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) that Polonius’s body is “with the King, but the King is not with the body” (4.2.25–26), Lacan states, “Replace the word ‘king’ with the word ‘phallus,’ and you’ll see that that’s exactly the point — the body is bound up [*engagé*] in this matter of the phallus . . . but the phallus, on the contrary, is bound to nothing: it always slips through your fingers.” Lacan, “Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*,” 52.

<sup>78</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (New York: Verso, 1996), 93. Important to note here is Zupančič’s point that the later Lacan’s claim that one can

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never get rid of *jouissance* does not cancel out the earlier Lacan's claim that *jouissance* does not exist; on the contrary, Lacan's goal is "to find a conceptualization (of the status) of enjoyment which would simultaneously embrace these two features: that *jouissance* does not exist, and that it is found everywhere," a conceptualization he found in the drive. Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real*, 242.

<sup>79</sup> Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 147.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 392.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 392, 51.

<sup>82</sup> Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real*, 244.

<sup>83</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, ix.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 2, ix.

<sup>85</sup> Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 417; Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 4.2.26.

<sup>86</sup> The classic reading of Ahab along these lines is that of F. O. Matthiessen, who claims that, in Ahab, Melville not only created "a fearful symbol of the self-enclosed individualism that, carried to its furthest extreme, brings disaster both upon itself and upon the group of which it is part," but also provided "an ominous glimpse of what was to result when the Emersonian will to virtue became in less innocent natures the will to power and conquest." F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), 459.

<sup>87</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989), 181.

<sup>88</sup> Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 438, 147.

<sup>89</sup> Zupančič, *What Is Sex?*, 122. As Zupančič adds, such a position also threatens to "jeopardiz[e] . . . precisely that political dimension of ontology that inspires [the] kind of democratic and egalitarian project" (122) for which New Materialism and object-oriented ontology stand.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 123. That this is arguably *the* most crucial of all the points Zupančič makes throughout *What Is Sex?* is suggested by the fact that it is the very point with which she opens the book. As she explains in the introduction, just when it seemed as though "philosophy itself was just about ready to abandon some of its classical notions ['such as subject, object, truth, representation, real'] to its own metaphysical past, from which it was eager to escape, along came Lacan, and taught us an invaluable lesson: it is not these notions themselves that are problematic; what is problematic (in some ways of doing philosophy) is the disavowal or effacement of the inherent contradiction (or antagonism) they all imply, and are part of" (2).