

## LACANIAN MATERIALISM AND THE QUESTION OF THE REAL

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**ABSTRACT:** This article attempts to explain the ambiguous association of Lacanian psychoanalysis with materialism. Resisting attempts to divide Lacan's work into discrete periods, I argue that, throughout his work, Lacan was concerned with articulating aspects of language and subjectivity that resist incorporation into networks of idealised meaning or sense, and that it is this emphasis on the materiality of language, routed through the concept of the Real, that makes up the particular 'materialism' of Lacanian theory. The emergence of this strain of thinking is located in Lacan's radical reworking of Freud's theses on primary narcissism.

**KEYWORDS:** Lacan; Psychoanalysis; Language; the Real

The question of the continuing value of varying kinds of materialism is central to much work in Continental philosophy today. The materialist legacy in political philosophy continues to provide a rich source for the analysis of contemporary capitalism, while Slavoj Žižek, Adrian Johnston and others are seeking to 'materialise' the legacy of German idealism through an attention to the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan, and in particular through his theory of the subject.<sup>1</sup> This paper argues, through a reading of a number of early texts by Lacan, that it is only through an attention to the conceptual genesis of the category of the Real that the materialist potential of Lacanian theory may be fully realised. The Real, I argue, is to be taken not as something extra-Symbolic, but as an overdetermining function that is materialised only through the particularity of the Symbolic and Imaginary registers. Further, I argue that it is through Lacan's complex philosophy of language, and especially through his insistence on the withdrawal of signifiers from networks of relation, that the Real becomes material, as constitutive as it is disruptive of the subject. At one and the same time, psychoanalytic theory, I argue, allows us to put into question the very validity of such oppositions as

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1. See, for instance, S. Žižek *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London and New York, Verso, 1989; A. Johnston *Žižek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press 2008.

subject/object, material/ideal, Imaginary/Symbolic, with the Real as the conceptual vehicle through which a more general psychoanalytic ontology skeptical of the prevailing binaries of contemporary thought might be realised.

The value in such questioning, distinct as it is from the meta textual dislocation afforded by deconstruction, is locatable as much in the disciplinary position of psychoanalysis, as it is in the specificity of its conceptual innovations. Psychoanalysis remains an interstitial discipline, caught between its clinical manifestations and the vast influence it has had upon the contemporary academy, especially in its Lacanian guise. The disjunction between clinical practise and academic psychoanalytic theory, while frequently the source for dispute and accusation among psychoanalysts and researchers, is nonetheless generative of various kinds of productive misunderstandings and cross-pollinations. Philosophy and psychoanalysis have, of course, entertained an ambiguous relationship since Freud, with his supposedly disavowed debts to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, and for all Lacan's protestations that his discourse was intended solely to ground the *practise* of analysis, there is little doubt in my mind that Lacanian theory sits at a usefully awkward angle to the mainstream of contemporary continental thought, reposing questions that might otherwise remain caught in the orthodoxies of the reproduction of philosophy as a discipline unto itself.

Indeed, as I will argue later, Lacan might be better understood as a non- if not anti-dialectical thinker, concerned with the paradoxical productivity of aporias and what we might call the weird materialism of the signifier, something I'll return to. It is worth asking, though, whether, in all of Žižek's proclamations of a specifically Lacanian materialism centred on the non-all of nature, on the constitutive incompleteness of matter<sup>2</sup>, the full philosophical implications of Lacan's materialism, if it is a materialism, have yet to be mined, particularly as it relates to the undermining in Lacanian theory of the notion of language as something supposedly 'extra-material', or ideal. It is, in part, due to a prevailing orthodoxy in the contemporary reception of Lacan's thought, one that, as well as isolating the Real *conceptually* from the Symbolic and the Imaginary registers, isolates the Real *periodically* as central only to the latter stages of Lacan's teaching, that the potential of Lacanian materialism has yet to be fully addressed. As a result, it is important to reconnect these different stages of Lacan's work, in particular to address the immanence of the Real to the articulation of the Imaginary and the Symbolic. Just as psychoanalysis' critical potential results as much from its disciplinary position, so Lacan's potential lies as much in the ways his work has been schematised to render it assimilable to existing academic logics.

To over-simplify somewhat, Lacan's teaching is frequently divided into early, middle and late periods, with distinct emphases and theoretical breaks progressing, we're often told, in a more or less linear fashion. The early Lacan, according to this narrative, was concerned with the elaboration of the Imaginary, the formation of the ego being read via a reading of Hegel's master/slave dialectic, and by a psychoanalytic recasting of Heidegger's Logos as the manifestation of a self-referencing ego, persistently under threat

2. S. Žižek, *The Parallax View*, Cambridge Mass., MIT Press, 2006, p. 200-252.

from the very elements that provoke its composition. The middle Lacan, by contrast, is said to be the Lacan of the Symbolic, of the logic of the signifier, for whom the subject is an effect of the metaphoric and metonymic movements of language. Finally, the late Lacan of the 1970s shifts to the Real, the indissoluble limit of interpretation which paradoxically grounds the subject in its fleeting consistency, coiled around the indivisible, material singularity of her symptom.<sup>3</sup> Any productive reading of Lacan as a materialist, I want to claim, must begin by rejecting this teleological approach to Lacan's teaching. Instead, it is the overdetermination of the category of the Real over the totality of the Lacanian seminar, early to late, and the complicated alliances the Real continually enacts and dissolves with the Imaginary and the Symbolic, that acts as the locus of a specifically Lacanian materialism

Such a claim is not necessarily in contradiction with Žižek's recent proclamations of materialism. In his *The Parallax View* from 2006, Žižek contends that 'materialism means that the reality I see is never 'whole'—not because a large part of it eludes me, but because it contains a stain, a blind spot, which indicates my inclusion in it'.<sup>4</sup> Here and elsewhere, Žižek's materialism seems to amount, in fact, to a post-Lacanian attempt to *transcend* any sharp distinction between materialism and idealism, such that the inclusion of the subject within the putatively objective sphere results not in a common variety skepticism or solipsism but rather in the materialisation or objectification of the subject itself, the recognition of the status of the subject as elusive object in the visual field; the distribution of the subject, that is, between and over any subject/object opposition. References to topological figures abound in such theorisation precisely because the aim is to sneak past, around, or over the insistence on a symmetrical, or even asymmetrical divide between subject and object, between matter and logos. Despite this, Žižek's reading of Lacan frequently restates a supposed exteriority of the Real to the Symbolic, even if he is also liable to insist on the absolute immanence of the Real when it will further his wider argument.<sup>5</sup> By rooting our understanding of the Real within the logic of the signifier we may begin to recognise the materiality of the immaterial, and the stubborn opacity of the material itself. Lacan's claim that it is through the signifier that this materiality is revealed to us should not be taken as a concession to any standard brand of anti-realism or hyper-textualism; to the contrary, Lacan's aim is to render superfluous any neat separation of the ideal from the material, from the representative to that to which it ostensibly refers.

From his work in the 1930s on aggressivity and narcissism onwards, Lacan was keen to identify the limit point around which the movements of Imaginary misrecognition and Symbolic identification fail. More precisely, Lacan wished to isolate those elements that provide both the limit point, a point of failure, and a simultaneous point of consis-

3. An illustrative example of this claim can be found in Dany Nobus, *Jacques Lacan and the Freudian Practice of Psychoanalysis*, London, Routledge, 2000, p. 84. Nobus' claim that 'Lacan's concept of the real had scarcely outweighed that of common-sense reality during the first ten years of his seminar' is demonstrably untrue and blocks an understanding of the potentiality of Lacan's Real.

4. S. Žižek, *The Parallax View*, p. 17.

5. See, for example, S. Žižek, *Enjoy your Symptom!*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London, Routledge, 2008, p. 63.

tency to the subject of the unconscious. In the imbroglio of primary narcissism, and in his theorisation of the aggressive ambivalence of the image of the Other in the formation of the ego, Lacan far exceeded the logic of supersession inherent to Hegelian phenomenology and familiar to us from Hegel's master/slave dialectic, positing the image of the Other, or ideal-ego, as an aporetic failure of self-completion or self-identity that, nonetheless, provides the only ground for the birth of the subject. In the very earliest of Lacan's seminars, and contrary to the typology of development outlined earlier, Lacan insists on the complex interrelationship between Imaginary and Symbolic, such that the development of the ego, situated principally in the domain of the Imaginary, requires isolated, proto-Symbolic elements, what I want to call signifiers-in-isolation, to map the fragile emergence of an alienated subjectivity.

Early in his 1949 presentation of the Mirror Stage, Lacan emphasises the primacy and temporally primary importance of what he calls the 'symbolic matrix' into which a child is born.<sup>6</sup> We might think of this matrix in terms of the name chosen for the child even before birth, and the opaque parental desire such a choice may signify, but at a more formal level the presence as constitutive background of a pre-Oedipal, nascent but nonetheless crucial level of symbolic abstraction acts as a further factor in rendering the child susceptible to alienation in the image. Lacan argues that it is only through the prior curving of subjective space, the beginnings of what will become the 'logic of the signifier'<sup>7</sup> that outside/inside, self/other distinctions might begin to impinge upon the senses, to be fixed at the level of the imaginary in the ideal-ego qua image of the other. Lacan's thinking here is in sharp distinction to the prioritisation in phenomenology of the act of a transcendental consciousness; Husserl's post-Kantian emphasis on the synthetic activity of consciousness ignores, for Lacan, the prior symbolisation necessary for phenomena to become meaningfully present to the subject. There is, even in 1949, no contradiction for Lacan in arguing that the child's 'jubilant assumption of his specular image by the kind of being—still trapped in his motor impotence and nursling dependence—the little man is at the infans stage thus seems to me to manifest in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the I is precipitated in a primordial form.'<sup>8</sup> That is, the primacy of the image is sustained by a minimal symbolic level, registering at the egoic level what Lacan will later define as the 'materiality' of language in its earliest instance, the signifier abstracted from relations of meaning, reduced to an abstract form of placing or coordination.

Elsewhere in the 'Mirror Stage', Lacan will refer to the result of imagistic identification as a 'finally donned armour of an alienating identity that will mark his entire mental development with its rigid structure'<sup>9</sup>, but this minimal interplay between a nascent symbolic matrix and the image of the other (or, to put it in more formal Lacanian terms, the beginnings of an asymmetric dialectic between the other and the big Other

6. J. Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink, New York, W. W. Norton, 2006, p. 94-101.

7. Jacques Alain-Miller most fully developed the concept of a 'logic of the signifier' in his article *La Suture* Cahiers pour l'analyse 1, Paris, Winter 1966.

8. Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 76.

9. Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 78.

of the Symbolic) points, I think, to an ontologically primordial *instability* in the shifting registers that Lacan identifies in human subjectivity. Just as, at this early stage, the child is caught between the bodily reality of fragmentation and displacement and the relative fixity of scopic identification, so at a more abstract level the very first elements of symbolic placing<sup>10</sup> point to the eventual, if only partial, capitulation of the ego to the rupture of the symbolic unconscious. Even after the resolution of the Oedipus complex, the antagonism between Imaginary formations and Symbolic co-ordinates can be identified as a primary source of anxiety for the subject, and the subtle implication of the importance of the 'symbolic matrix' even at this early stage in child development provides an early glimpse of this. By the point at which *objet petit a* has emerged out of the concept of the ideal-ego, it is the radical instability of surplus desire that is posited by Lacan as the result of imagistic identification, rather far from any notion of the Imaginary as a suturing function.

Many of the conceptual innovations that will, in later seminars, be associated with the Real are birthed here; the ambivalent image of the Other, providing both the impetus and threat to the subject's emergent identity, and codified as the ideal-ego, will later give rise to *objet petit a*, the object-cause of desire, the image of the Other reduced to a non-specularisable blind spot, an absent cause structurally unlocatable in symmetrical topographies of Self and Other. It is worth considering, in turn, the ways in which Lacan's early reflections on the relationship between the logic of the signifier and the Real extend this double logic of Imaginary into a general economy of a psychoanalytic ontology predicated on the overdetermination of the Real.

When, in his third seminar on the Psychoses, Lacan emphasises the particularity of the psychotic's relationship to language, he will draw conclusions that bear on a more general philosophy of language, and one particularly cognisant of the materiality of the signifier. The psychotic, Lacan argues, suffers from a fault in the paternal function or the paternal signifier, such that the normally multidimensional character of the Symbolic is reduced to the closed, dyadic logic of the Imaginary.

Lacan succinctly introduces his thesis on psychosis as follows :

Prior to all symbolisation—this priority is not temporal but logical—there is, as the psychoses demonstrate, a stage at which it is possible for a portion of symbolisation not to take place. This initial stage precedes the entire neurotic dialectic, which is due to the fact that neurosis is articulated speech, in so far as the repressed and the return of the repressed are one and the same thing. It can thus happen that something primordial regarding the subject's being does not enter into symbolisation and is not repressed, but rejected.<sup>11</sup>

If, then, neurosis is predicated on the repression of a signifier or chain of signifiers, psychosis represents a more radical rejection or, to the use the term Lacan uses through-

10. I hesitate to refer to this as a form of symbolic spatialisation; it is, I think, only with the installation of the Name of the Father and the full accession to the Symbolic that the signifiatory logic of space becomes primary for Lacan, even as subjective space has been prefigured through the dyadic form of the Imaginary.

11. J. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book 3 1955-1956 : The Psychoses*, trans. Russell Grigg, New York, Routledge, p. 81.

out his third seminar, foreclosure. That which is foreclosed is the paternal signifier, the name-of-the-father, or the full institution of the third element or law that breaks up the proto-psychotic dyad of the Imaginary relation. The psychotic's relation to language is, then, constitutively and logically determinant of her post-Oedipal being. For the neurotic, alienation in language concomitant with primary repression, the final separation that ends, or at least displaces, the imbroglio of primary narcissism, constitutes a contingent and precarious removal from the proximity of the Real qua antagonism. For the psychotic, by contrast, even such a meagre 'protection' from the Real is unavailable. The question remains, however, whether such a proximity to the Real for the psychotic occurs entirely outside the logic of the signifier or whether it is within the logic of signification that we might find the Real in its relation to the psychotic. Lacan will equivocate on this, but it is my contention that the latter thesis is the more predominant, and least acknowledged, facet of Lacan's theory of language. The wager of this paper, moreover, is that the account of the complex relation between language and psychosis offered by Lacan in his third seminar offers us a more general sense of how language is always already implicated in an asymmetrical relation of overdetermination with the Real.

The more popular thesis outlined above, whereby the separation of the Real from the Symbolic is maintained by reference to the supposed rejection of post-Oedipal accession in psychosis, has often been associated with one of the most cited passages in seminar three. In a discussion of Freud's case of the Wolf Man, Lacan outlines how an early hallucination described by Freud of the cutting of a finger with a knife, an episode that the Wolf Man is unable to recount in speech, illustrates the thesis that 'what is refused in the symbolic order re-emerges in the real'.<sup>12</sup> We are led, initially, to believe, as Lacan baldly states it, that 'he [the Wolf Man] has rejected all means of access to castration...all access to the register of the symbolic function'.<sup>13</sup> Just a few lines down, however, Lacan nuances his position, claiming that what is at stake is a 'range, a series, of relations' between the Symbolic, the Real and the subject's hallucination, what Lacan 'provisionally calls the subject's history in the symbolic'.<sup>14</sup> Lacan goes on to indicate his hesitation and caution—'I don't know whether I shall retain this combination of terms'—before concluding that 'the origin of the neurotic repressed is not situated at the same level of history in the symbolic as that of the repressed in psychosis'.<sup>15</sup>

What is at stake in Lacan's cautious appraisal of the Wolf Man's hallucination, and perhaps the reason for his uncharacteristic theoretical caution here, is precisely the wider implications of his theory of psychosis for his theory of the interrelation of the Symbolic and the Real. We see Lacan inching here towards a recognition, made more explicit elsewhere, that the Symbolic—presupposed even in the predominantly Imaginary domain of egoic identification—is the necessary background of a certain theory of signification for even those psychic processes most associated with the Real of mental

12. Lacan, *The Psychoses*, p. 13.

13. Lacan, *The Psychoses*, p. 13.

14. Lacan, *The Psychoses*, p. 13.

15. Lacan, *The Psychoses*, p. 13.

disintegration. As quoted above, Lacan needs to insist on the ‘history’ of the subject’s relation to the Symbolic as such, we are enjoined to suppose that such a history is irrevocable, even as he distinguishes between the ‘levels’ of such a history in neurotic or psychotic structures. To do otherwise would be to render his account of Oedipal development and the subsequent generalisation of the Imaginary/Symbolic relation incoherent; as we have seen, the narcissistic appropriation of the image of the other is theoretically impossible without the minimal co-ordinates of a pre-Oedipal symbolic mapping, made concrete in Lacan’s reflections in his fifth seminar on the importance of the parents’ verbal encouragement of the baby’s narcissistic jubilation in the face of her mirror image. The isolated co-ordinates of a proto-Symbolic ensure that the image of Imaginary narcissism succeeds in interpolating the nascent subject.

This relation between the Real of the Wolf Man’s hallucination and the Symbolically-enabled Imaginary identification of the ego is made explicit by Lacan soon after the reflections quoted above. Discussing the nascent ego, Lacan remarks that ‘one’s relationship to the ego is fundamentally ambiguous, one’s assumption of the ego is always revocable. In the psychotic subject on the other hand certain elementary phenomena... show us the subject completely identified with his ego, with which he speaks, or with the ego assumed entirely along instrumental lines.’<sup>16</sup> Here, the implicit importance of Lacan’s insistence on the importance of the ‘symbolic history’ becomes explicit, but only if we recognise that the *aspect* of the symbolic Lacan is invoking here is not that of the integrated, post-Oedipal relationality of signification, what Lacan refers to here as ‘full speech’, but those problematically isolated and insistent signifiers dispersed among the movements of primary narcissism. Here, we come to recognise that, far from the Symbolic being radically foreclosed or revoked by the phenomena of psychosis, the rejection of the paternal signifier makes operative and primary those Real aspects of signification—which is to say, signifiers torn away from the negative constitution of meaningful communication and tied to the aggressive movements of primary identification—that, as we shall see, must be presupposed, if kept at bay, for *any* signification to be operative for the subject. As Lacan says, ‘it’s as if a third party, his lining, were speaking and commenting on his activity.’<sup>17</sup> This mysterious ‘lining’, I propose, is nothing but the Symbolically mandated split caused by the necessity of the identification with the image of the other, an image that is finally inseparable from the isolated, opaque signifiers that support its operation.<sup>18</sup>

To speak of a subject’s ‘lining’ is to bring into question the barrier between self and other, between inside and outside. It is through the introjection of alienating images of the other that such a boundary qua ego is constructed, but it is also predicated on a

16. Lacan, *The Psychoses*, p. 14.

17. Lacan, *The Psychoses*, p. 14.

18. Serge Andre usefully reconnects Lacan’s complicated theoretical reflections on the Wolf Man to Freud, a reconnection I will myself attempt below. Andre emphasises the ‘pre-historic reality’ of the psychotic subject for Freud, a pre-history that is recoded by Lacan as the persistence of the intertwining of a degraded and dissipated Symbolic with the movements of primary narcissism. See *What Does A Woman Want* by Serge Andre, New York, Other Press, 1999, p. 2.

minimal level of unconscious symbolic identification, even if such an identification can only be attached to pre-Oedipal, which is to say opaque, signifiers. Such signifiers, exemplified by Lacan but not limited to the affirmative (or otherwise) noises parents make when watching a child in front of its reflection, provide a minimal and only level of coordination for the nascent subject. The implication of Lacan's argument here is that, for the psychotic, such a minimal coordination is all that can be guaranteed; with the paternal law being foreclosed, only the closed dyadic logic of the Imaginary can prevail, even as it is supported by the signifier at its most opaque and non-relational. For the common variety neurotic, which by the end of Lacan's teaching must be considered to be anyone who has acceded fully to the Symbolic, the dyadic logic of demand that accompanies primary narcissism has been nuanced with the metonymy of desire in the signifier; desire, properly speaking, is absent for the psychotic precisely by virtue of the lack of a full installation of the paternal law.

If the general mark of a fully functioning Symbolic is the ability to lie whilst telling the truth—to, in other words, make full use of language's multidimensionality, its ironic structure—the psychotic is a prisoner of the literal, bereft of the metaphoric potential of communication. In furthering his discussion, in part through a reading of the famous case of Judge Schreber's paranoia first discussed by Freud, Lacan distinguishes between what he calls 'two levels' and sometimes 'two layers' of signification present in the discourse of the psychotic, and he emphasises the prominence of one layer in particular, what Lacan will sometimes call the 'letter', defined in his early 'Ecrits' as the material substrate of the signifier, the 'material support that concrete discourse borrows from language'.<sup>19</sup>Theoretically, the Lacanian account of these two levels of discourse—that is, the isolated letter or signifier-in-isolation, extracted from the relations of negative reference that ultimately give meaning to language—and the signifier as it primarily exists in non-psychotic discourse, embedded in structures of relationality and in metaphoric concatenations of meaningfulness, point us back to Lacan's account of primary narcissism. In the following quote from his third seminar, Lacan describes the peculiarity of Schreber's use of neologisms, commenting that: 'The meaning of these words that pull you up has the property of referring essentially to meaning *as such*. It's a meaning that essentially refers to nothing but itself, that remains irreducible...Before being reducible to another meaning it signifies within itself something ineffable, it's a meaning that refers above all to meaning as such'.<sup>20</sup>

Such a description could equally apply to the comments Lacan makes, as discussed above, on the importance of proto-signifiers, signifiers-in-withdrawal from relation, in the construction of the nascent ego, prior to the onset of the Oedipus complex. We find, in other words, a continuity between these often falsely isolated stages of Lacan's teaching, that of the famous article on the Mirror Stage and his other pioneering work on primary narcissism in the 1940s and the later, supposedly hyper-structuralist seminars that focus, we are told, on the Symbolic. For both periods of Lacan's teaching, a sub-

19. Lacan, *Ecrits*, p. 413.

20. Lacan, *The Psychoses*, p. 33.



strate of the signifier, described as material and indivisible and implicated as the ground to the artifice of Imaginary recognition, exists as the primary element in the theoretical elucidation of subjectivity. Furthermore, this principle quality of the signifier, what I'm calling the signifier-in-isolation and what Lacan will elucidate through the coining of a number of conceptual terms—unary trait, letter, master-signifier and finally the symptom recast as the 'sinthome'—figures as Real, in the sense that Lacan always gave it from 1953 onwards. The Real, that is, as the element that always returns to its place, that admits of no mediation, and that finally disturbs any neat division of subject and object, self and world, perhaps even life and death.

What are the wider implications of these arguments for a potential psychoanalytic materialism? First, we must recognise that it is within language, that supposed domain of polysemy, of the final break between human and thing, subject and object, that Lacan locates a stubborn materiality, resistant to relation in a way similar, if only superficially, to the description Graham Harman frequently gives of the withdrawal of (real) objects.<sup>21</sup> If Harman's objects withdraw, Lacan's signifiers—so frequently glossed in terms far closer, in fact, to Derrida than Lacan himself—do so, paradoxically, because of the sheer multiplicity of attachments that they can make, but breaking from such a potentiality, persisting in the unconscious and accruing symptomatic weight even as they break away from metonymic relations. The signifier gains in power, that is, the more it withdraws from relation. When Derrida himself, and his students Jean-Luc Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, accuse Lacan of a covert linguistic idealism,<sup>22</sup> we have to ask whether their argument takes full cognisance of this paradoxical materiality of the signifier, its shrinking away from, and disruption of, subjectivity, even as it supports the only basis upon which, through the imbroglia of primary narcissism, subjectivity can begin to build.

What is revealed here, I think, is an immanent transcendence in Lacan's work of the limits of a structuralist, or post-structuralist approach to the movements of signification. Far from the Saussurean idealism so often imputed to him, Lacan's concern for the material characteristics of signification widens the ontological scope of his psychoanalytic theory, such that our understanding of what divides the material from the ideal, the present from that which is represented, is fundamentally disrupted. In the 1970s, when Lacan will come to redefine the psychoanalytic symptom as situated in the Real, as the meaningless self-referentiality that grounds the subject's divided being, we see the recapitulation within a different theoretical space of his very earliest reflections on language.<sup>23</sup> Here, the limitations of popular typologies of Lacan's teaching, the supposed movement from the Imaginary, to the Symbolic, to the Real, become very clear. To artificially impose such a schematics of development on Lacan is to miss the ever-

21. G. Harman, *Prince of Networks : Bruno Latour and Metaphysics*, Melbourne : Re-press, 2009, p. 151-233.

22. See J. Derrida, *The Postcard : From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1987, p. 411-497; J.-L. Nancy and P. Lacoue-Labarthe, *The Title of the Letter : A Reading of Lacan*, Albany NY : SUNY Press, 1992.

23. J. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book 23 : Le Sinthome*, trans. Luke Thurston (unpublished manuscript).

presence in his work of a concern for the psychic efficacy of the most material elements of the supposedly ideal space of a linguistic subjectivity—that is, for the thorough interpenetration of the ideal with the material, the material with the ideal.

When, in his 23<sup>rd</sup> Seminar, Lacan turns to the work of James Joyce, he does so because he recognises in Joyce a thorough explication of the material unmeaning of isolated signifiers and the occasional, in Joyce's late work epiphenomal, irruption of meaning from such a senseless ground. Meaning and unmeaning, sense and non-sense, collide here in the neologistic experimentations of Joyce's prose, a prose that reveals to us the material ground of signification that in other, less overt contexts, may remain hidden.<sup>24</sup> By extrapolating, however, from such an account of language, already present in his very earliest work as I've emphasised, to a more general concept of a material symptom, whereby the subject's very consistency is dependent on an inherently meaningless and self-referential point or insistence, Lacan marks out the terrain of a materialism expanded beyond the limits of a theory of signification and gesturing towards a renewed psychoanalytic ontology.

It is as if, by developing his theory of the 'sinthome' in the 1970s, the symptom recast as Real, Lacan has taken what he had previously assumed to be a materiality localised in signification, and raised it to the function of a quasi-transcendental condition for Being as such. There, Lacan redefines the symptom as 'the way in which each subject enjoys the unconscious, in so far as the unconscious determines him'.<sup>25</sup> Just as sense relies on material non-sense, so psychoanalytic Being relies on a singular point of non-Being, uniting in its insistence what might otherwise scatter and skid on the movements of the signifier. What unites such a putative ontology are, I think, those elements, resistant to dialectical recuperation, indivisible and insistent, that Lacan groups around the idea of the Real. That these elements are constitutive of the *Symbolic* as much as they are external to signification, that they are present in Lacan's early reflections on primary narcissism and the mirror stage, is to be taken as the surest sign that a Lacanian ontology is rather less concerned with the hypostatisation of symbolic lack, with any kind of post-Kantian insistence on the inviolability of the in-itself beyond the text, as it is with a thoroughgoing materialist immanence that troubles the borders between the materially and ideally existent. They do not, it should be emphasised again, mark the final triumph of the text over its referent or the subject over the object, precisely because they signal a repudiation of the very distinction between subject and object, logos and matter, such that an object-like insistence provides the ground for both meaning and psychoanalytic being as such.

At any rate, what such an ontology would refuse is the reduction of the question of materialism purely to 'matter' as object of science, or to the priorities of a scientific or naturalist realism. Further, what I hope my reflections offer here is a sense of the internal potential of Lacanian theory to generate its own conceptual innovations. Recent work by Adrian Johnston and others to establish links between psychoanalysis and neu-

24. Lacan, *Le Sinthome*, unpublished manuscript.

25. Lacan, *Le Sinthome*, unpublished manuscript.

rosience are welcome, but it's important too to recognise the benefits inherent in the theoretical resources Lacan offers. It may well be that Lacan's innovations around the question of materiality and the signifier require a language wholly apart from that of 'materialism' and 'idealism'—Lacan's increasing turn in his later years to topology reflects, I think, his own frustration with prevailing analytical languages—but for now the invocation of the material, imperfect as it, serves to capture some of the non-dialectical obstinacy of the Real.

Further, and as I've suggested, the development of such a paradoxical materialism through Lacanian theory may provoke productive alliances and suggestive disjunctions with a variety of contemporary theoretical trends, perhaps most promisingly with the renewal of interest in an Althusser-derived rationalism and with the mathematical ontology of Alain Badiou. The benefits of recent thinking around the question of an object-oriented ontology<sup>26</sup> and the debates on the blogosphere and elsewhere as to the benefits of a speculative realism<sup>27</sup> have been in the insistence on the importance of non-human agency, and psychoanalysis I think, particularly when we question the supposed extricability of language from the world, the symmetry of a human/non-human topography, offers a complementary discourse centred on those aspects of existence that slip between binaries of human and non-human, life and death, material and ideal. This article has illuminated one aspect of that theoretical legacy, the inextricability of material signifiers in the Real of psychoanalytic ontology. If there is common ground to be found between those philosophers keen to dethrone the human as the sole source of the subject/object relation and psychoanalysis conceived as materialist ontology, it is perhaps through the sheer *intransigence* of the materiality, no matter how substantially different, with which both traditions of thought have to contend.

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26. Harman, *Prince of Networks*.

27. See, in particular, Q. Meillassoux *After Finitude : An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, Continuum, London, 2008.

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