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ECKHART AND THE EK-SISTENCE OF GOD:
A MYSTICAL QUARTER TURN IN THE THEOLOGY OF THE REAL

‘Let us pray to God that we may be free of God’¹
Meister Eckhart, *Sermon 52*

‘Naturally, you are all going to be convinced that I believe in God. I believe in the *jouissance* of the woman, insofar as it is extra (en +) . . . Doesn't this *jouissance* one experiences and yet knows nothing about put us on the path of ex-sistence?’²
Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XX*

Introduction

The German friar and the French psychoanalyst are here caught in a strange moment of divergence as the former frees himself from God while the latter appears, albeit ambiguously, to avow him. The two are, however, circling the same possibility: that God ‘ek-sists’, that is, that he is truly real and thus outside reality. The argument of this paper is that while Lacan will come to rule out the possibility of ek-sistence when he collapses it into reality itself, Eckhart was able to follow the same argumentative structure without giving up on the real no-thing that vanishes from time and space. He does so by use of a distinctive dialectical account of the Trinitarian God, whose ‘boiling’ (*bullitio*) reproduces himself both into nothing and as himself. Eckhart’s Trinitarianism is also at the core of the most sustained Lacanian engagement with his work thus far, that of Slavoj Žižek, who reads Eckhart as a Docetic for whom God and the world are a substance to be escaped for an un-, or barely, divine Abyss.³ Eckhart’s failure, for Žižek, is not to realise that the consequence of his own account of God’s ‘birth in the soul’ is that God is an enigma ‘to God himself’.⁴ As a consequence, Eckhart cannot give an account of the traumatic encounter with the Thing, the ‘monstrosity of Christ’. This

¹ Josef Quint, ed., *Meister Eckhart. Deutsche Werke*, vol. 2: Predigten (Kohlhammer, 1988), 493; Meister Eckhart, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, ed. Bernard McGinn, trans. Maurice O’C Walshe, Third Edition (New York: Herder & Herder, 2010), 422.

² Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge* (Norton, 1999), 77.

³ Slavoj Žižek, ‘The Fear of Four Words: A Modest Plea for the Hegelian Reading of Christianity’, in *The Monstrosity of Christ* (The MIT Press, 2011), 33–43; this article thus shares similar concerns, if a different trajectory, to: Chase Padusniak, ‘“No Wonder, Then, That Love Itself Disappears”: Neighbor-Love in Žižek and Meister Eckhart’, in *Slavoj Žižek and Christianity*, ed. Sotiris Mitralaxis and Dionysios Skliris (London: Routledge, 2018).

⁴ Žižek, ‘The Fear of Four Words’, 40.

paper returns to a more orthodox reading of Eckhart to recover the strange dialectics of his Trinity that frustrates both the collapse of the real in the late Lacan and the lack-in-God posited by Žižek. In the end, it takes a quarter turn between what Lacanian theologians have come to call the ‘God of the Real’ and the ‘God of the Symbolic’, that is, a God of extra-legal alterity and the God who secures the law as its constitutive exception, to suggest what might be best described as a ‘God into the Real’. This allows, paradoxically, for a Žižekian reading of Eckhart that discovers the Trinity-*qua*-Thing in his theology of friendship.

Other Jouissance

The ek-sistence of God in Lacanian thought is built on his account of ‘Other *jouissance*’ (JA), proposed in Seminar XX, ‘Encore’,⁵ a possibility that would come to be excluded in the next few years as Lacan developed the analogy of the Borromean knot that knits together the three orders of the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary.⁶ It best explicated using the graph of sexuation, which, following Žižek, is here understood ontologically, as describing the two ways in which reality itself is constituted relative to its own failure to constitute itself, an impossibility that may be shown as much from modern logic as from Freudian theory.⁷ The graph is split into four, with the male on the left and the female on the right.⁸ The upper left-hand, masculine side of the graph posits one entity not subject to the ‘phallic function’ that signifies castration and the incompleteness of reality. This is a master signifier without lack, such as a God, which can secure reality by not being subject to it. Indeed, Lacan argues, this God is presupposed by any act of speech, any participation in the law that claims its coherence and integrity.⁹

The upper right-hand, feminine side, however, posits that not all are submitted to the phallic function, that is, that ‘something’ of everything escapes castration, and thus reality itself. This, then, denies the possibility of a master signifier, a

⁵ Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality*.

⁶ Dylan Evans, ‘From Kantian Ethics to Mystical Experience: An Exploration of Jouissance’, in *Key Concepts of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (Routledge, 1995), 9–10.

⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (MIT Press, 2009), 23; cf. Lorenzo Chiesa, ‘Woman and the Number of God’, in *Theology after Lacan*, ed. Creston Davis, Marcus Pound, and Clayton Crockett (MIT Press, 2015), 176, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1cgfbck.4>.

⁸ My summary here is indebted to: Chiesa, ‘Woman’; cf. Bruce Fink, ‘Knowledge and Jouissance’, in *Reading Seminar XX: Lacan’s Major Work on Love, Knowledge, and Feminine Sexuality*, ed. Suzanne Barnard and Bruce Fink (New York: SUNY Press, 2012), 36–43.

⁹ In this sense, both atheists and believers affirm such a God, whether explicitly or in repression. Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality*, 45; Chiesa, ‘Woman’, 176; Lorenzo Chiesa, *The Not-Two: Logic and God in Lacan*, Short Circuits (Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press, 2016), xii–xiii.

God who can 'un-castrate' reality and render it coherent: reality is simply lacking (since that 'something' which is not part of reality is, in fact, nothing). In the lower half of the feminine side, the sexuuated woman (a 'La' that is barred to indicate that she is 'not all') is directed both to the phallus and to the signifier of the barred Other. The first is the search for a signifier that can identify her within reality.¹⁰ But it is the second dynamic of *jouissance*, which sources it directly from the lack in the Other, that which is missing from reality, and so from the Real itself, that Lacan associates with the *jouissance* of the mystics (whether male or female). The difference between a masculine *jouissance*, the repetitive, obsessive attempt to complete the Symbolic, to fill in its constitutive lack and un-castrate reality itself, and a feminine *jouissance* between an already incompletely symbolised entity and incompleteness itself is, then, that between the God of the Symbolic and of the Real.

Tom Dalzell has argued that JA makes it possible for Lacan to 'relate the "infinitude" of femininity's not being limited by phallic *jouissance* to the experience of God outside of the Symbolic domain, the God of the mystics' and not the authoritarian, institutionalised God of traditional religious teaching.¹¹ Giving up on a God of the Symbolic for a God of the Real entails a radical change in theological politics – a rejection of the supreme signifier that secures the Symbolic, manifest in the murders of Moses and Christ (according to Freud) or the repressive activity of human institutions (such as the church). It is precisely this that a recent collection of essays sought to explore, with the promise that: 'Post-Lacanian theology traverses the fantasy of an absolute God in order to live into the calling of a radically contingent love; or, that which we have no control over and yet desire. If you like, we want to rename theology as a flow of desire devoid of the big Other, a desire that gives birth to an ethics beyond morals, and to a connection beyond the centred Ego at home with itself.'¹² This ambition has evident similarity with Žižek's pneumatology (a realisation of Lacan's 'community of analysts', where the lack in the other is the source and object of love)¹³ and Marcus Pound's recent Lacanian 'repetition' of Kierkegaard.¹⁴

¹⁰ Chiesa, 'Woman', 184.

¹¹ Tom Dalzell, 'On the Death of God in Lacan – A Nuanced Atheism', *The Heythrop Journal* 63, no. 1 (2022): 27–34, <https://doi.org/10.1111/heyj.13976>.

¹² Creston Davis, Marcus Pound, and Clayton Crockett, 'Introduction: Traversing the Theological Fantasy', in *Theology after Lacan*, ed. Creston Davis, Marcus Pound, and Clayton Crockett, 2015, 2, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1cgfbck.4>.

¹³ Žižek, *The Parallax View*; see the succinct survey in: Adam Kotsko, *Zizek and Theology* (A&C Black, 2008), chap. 3.

¹⁴ See esp.: Marcus Pound, *Theology, Psychoanalysis and Trauma* (London: Hymns Ancient and Modern Ltd, 2007), chap. 7.

These varied responses suggest, however, the problem of theologising feminine *jouissance*, which Lacan left highly ambiguous:¹⁵ is the barred Other God; or the, or a, locus of God? Is the giving up of an 'absolute God' also the giving up of any Theism recognisable from orthodox theologies? What would make 'a flow of desire' or 'a radically contingent love' theological? Lacanian theologians tend to write optimistically of this God of the Real as politically emancipatory, as an authentic lover, as the foil of an oppressive God of the Symbolic. But the Lacanian poetics of the Real are nearly always traumatic: the monster, the return of the repressed, the abyss, the blot. One commentator notes that 'this requires a reading of Lacan that replaces the negative moment in psychoanalysis – castration, cut of the signifier, retroactive constitution of a supposed original access to *jouissance* – with a real fullness of being from which we have fallen'.¹⁶ Lorenzo Chiesa renders Lacanian sexuation as an inescapable binary between incompleteness that simply is (but can never be affirmed, since this would complete it) and incompleteness that is the complete truth of an inconsistent God (thus leaving room for truth).¹⁷

In a brilliant reading of Seminar XX, Chiesa warns that Other *jouissance* is not a transcendent entity but rather an epiphenomena of reality, a fictive One erected by the not-One: 'The "supplementary" nature of unspeakable feminine *jouissance* should... be understood as that which, in "escaping" symbolization, depends on it qua its inherent impasse, as the not-all of symbolization'.¹⁸ Thus the barred Other should not be reified, turning 'the idealistic hypostatisation of the not-One of language into a real not-One', such as a 'real' woman or, presumably, a mystic.¹⁹ Indeed, her relation to the Other is only made possible by her being constituted by the phallic function in the first place.²⁰ It is often noted that Lacan never mentions feminine *jouissance* again after Seminar XX, where it receives its most explicit, if still mysterious, evocation. Chiesa argues forcefully that this is the necessary working out of Lacan's old observation that 'there is no Other of the [Symbolic] Other', meaning:

given that the symbolic Other is not (any longer) legitimized by any Other external guarantor (i.e. the

¹⁵ Fink, 'Knowledge and *Jouissance*', 38.

¹⁶ Ian Parker, *Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Revolutions in Subjectivity* (Routledge, 2010).

¹⁷ Chiesa, *The Not-Two*, xiv-xv; Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 24.

¹⁸ Chiesa, 'Woman', 177. This reading is, indeed, consistent with Lacanian theory going back to the Rome discourse of 1953.

¹⁹ Chiesa, 186.

²⁰ Chiesa, 189-90; Ben Morgan, *On Becoming God: Late Medieval Mysticism and the Modern Western Self: Late Medieval Mysticism and the Modern Western Self* (Fordham Univ Press, 2013), 12-13.

universalised Law of the Name-of-the-Father), and given that the Symbolic is non-All--Real Otherness with respect to the Symbolic is no longer possible. In other words, for the final Lacan, there is no 'primordial One' which was originally 'killed' by the Symbolic; there is no Pure Real (no 'real Real') beyond the dimension of the Real-in-the-Symbolic, that is, of the leftover of the Real which 'holes' the Symbolic (in its conjunction with the Imaginary).²¹

He rejects the JA of Seminar XX since it is necessarily relative to reality and, thus, not truly other.²² As Lacan says in Seminar XXIII: 'JA barred concerns *jouissance*, but not Other *jouissance*, given that I have stated that there is no Other of the Other, i.e. that there is nothing to be opposed to the Symbolic qua place of the Other; the fact that A is barred entails that there is no Other *jouissance* in as much as there is no Other of the Other.'²³ Chiesa concludes: 'JA barred is therefore a (form of) *jouissance* of the impossibility of JA'.²⁴ It is, in other words, returned to, one might say secularised as, reality.

The transition between these two reals is dramatized in Žižek's Trinitarian theology: in dying on the cross, God reveals his essential weakness, his own not-all femininity, collapsing forever the possibility of a God who can undergird reality, the ontotheological project.²⁵ Such a conclusion seems terminal for a theological project that seeks to traverse a God qua master signifier in favour of a God of the Real qua transcendence, divine alterity or substantial love: since the latter is reduced to 'pure' hole, and the *jouissance* it promises to *jouissance* of a lack of *jouissance*, any divinity would be evaporated in its immanence to the (constitutive failure of) reality.²⁶ Any possibility of a mystical contact with an ek-sistent Other is excluded. The next step for a Lacanian theology, if it does not simply refuse or accept the collapse, must address the relationship, if there is one, between *différance* and God, between the hole in reality and a true alterity.²⁷ For this, it is less the God of the mystics than of the mystical theologians that

²¹ The hole, in Chiesa's reading, is the 'absence of *jouissance*', which can only be enjoyed as a lack (of *jouissance*). Lorenzo Chiesa, *Subjectivity and Otherness: A Philosophical Reading of Lacan* (MIT Press, 2007), 183–84.

²² Chiesa radically collapses taxonomies of *jouissance*: positing a single 'ideological phallic *jouissance*' that might be considered alternately from the perspective of the structure and of the subject, pace: Néstor A. Braunstein, 'Desire and Jouissance in the Teachings of Lacan', in *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 102–15, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521807441.007>.

²³ Jacques Lacan, *The Sinthome: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XXIII* (Wiley, 2018).

²⁴ Chiesa, *Subjectivity and Otherness*, 187.

²⁵ For an excellent survey of this account see: Kotsko, *Zizek and Theology*, chap. 3.

²⁶ Cf. John D. Caputo, 'Mysticism And Transgression: Derrida And Meister Eckhart', in *Derrida and Deconstruction* (Routledge, 1989), 26. That *différance* cannot itself be a basis for theism is often argued by Caputo.

²⁷ This suggests the work of Caputo on Derrida: Caputo, 'Mysticism and Transgression'.

offers a way forward: not the recovery of a special kind of *jouissance* ('they feel it, but know nothing about it')²⁸ but the examination of how a strictly apophatic metaphysics is combined with the practice of contemplation. This paper takes a Lacanian path through Eckhart's account of creation, mystic union and Trinitarian theology (ontology, praxis and the Real), with the latter offered as an inflexion to a Lacanian impasse, a means of rescuing the Real without giving a positive account of it, a quarter turn between Seminars XX and XXIII. It is, to anticipate my conclusion, the strangeness of the divine dialectic that enables the Real to remain both full and empty in the moment of mystical union.

Creation and Reality

The utility of turning to Eckhart for the development of a Lacanian deadlock lies in three conditions, of which the first two are: (1) a structural similarity between ontologies that identify two incommensurate orders (the Real and reality; the Creator and creation), which are (2) mutually constitutive.²⁹ (The third is the subject of the next section.) In the case of Eckhart, a systematic account of how existence relies on God may be found in his discussion of the use of predicates. In the early *Parisian Questions*, for example, Eckhart rejects Thomas' claim for the identity of the terms *esse* and *intelligere*, being and understanding, and ascribes the second to God; in the later, unfinished *Opus tripartitum*, he centres his arguments on the claim '*esse est Deus*'. As has long been noted, however, any apparent contradiction is quite easily resolved by reference to Eckhart's theory of analogy.³⁰ When 'being' refers to created reality – the material world – it indicates division, multiplicity and posteriority, and cannot be predicated of God, who is, thus, in contrast, 'understanding'. Conversely, when predicated of God, *esse* indicates the nothingness of creatures, that is, their ontological dependence on him. The application of 'being' and 'understanding', is in other words dialectical, and so appropriate predication is a question of ontological difference. At the heart of this distinction for Eckhart, as for medieval theologians generally, was vigilance regarding the impiety of producing a God of the Symbolic, of turning ek-sistence into existence by the uncareful use of predicates.³¹

²⁸ Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality*, 76.

²⁹ Fink, 'Knowledge and Jouissance', 39–40.

³⁰ Bernard McGinn, 'The God beyond God: Theology and Mysticism in the Thought of Meister Eckhart', *The Journal of Religion* 61, no. 1 (1981): 7–8; see, however, the nuanced survey in: Jeremiah M. G. Hackett and Jennifer Hart Weed, 'From Aquinas to Eckhart on Creation, Creature, and Analogy', in *A Companion to Meister Eckhart*, ed. Jeremiah Hackett (Brill, 2013), 205–36.

³¹ Ian Almond, 'Doing Violence upon God: Nonviolent Alterities and Their Medieval Precedents', *The Harvard Theological Review* 92, no. 3 (1999): 325–47; Caputo, 'Mysticism and Transgression', 33.

Eckhart, like Lacan, recognises that, although absent from each other, the two orders are mutually constitutive, as becomes clear in his creation theology, which follows a dialectic wholly consistent with his use of predicates. In Sermon 52, he writes that ‘before the creatures existed, God was not ‘God,’ but he was what he was. But when the creatures came into existence and they received their created Being, then God was not in his own self ‘God,’ but he was ‘God’ in the creatures’.³² Like the Real and reality, Creator and creation exist only insofar as the other does not, and retrospectively positing a pre-ontological state of divine unity.³³ Eckhart makes the same point as the Lacan of Seminar XXIII: the God of the Real, transpires not to be wholly ex-tended from reality – to place him *outside* reality is still to place him *outside reality*. This allows for the startling conclusion that ‘I am the cause of God’s being the God [of the creatures]; if I did not exist, God would not be God’.³⁴ Creation entails a separation in the immanent self-being of God, one that produces not only creation but also Creator: the God of the Real exists only inasmuch as he is not (the God of) the Symbolic. Without creation/Symbolic, there is no Creator/Real. Quite why this does not entail the abandonment of the divine is the subject of the next section.

Lacan accounts for the insubstantiality of material reality not, of course, as divine creation but rather, extending the logic of structuralist linguistics, as consisting only of chains of signifiers, in an endless postponement of meaning that, consequently, never resolves reality into something concrete.³⁵ The consequence is well summed up by Žižek’s pithy question: ‘why is there nothing rather than something?’³⁶ It is this incompleteness that is being described in the two models of sexuation described above. Reality’s failure to provide its own ontological grounding is also affirmed by Eckhart in terms of its inability to account for its existence. The following is taken from Sermon 5b:

If anyone went on for a thousand years asking of life: ‘Why are you living?’ life, if it could answer, would only say: ‘I live so that I may live.’ That is because life lives out of its own ground and springs from its own source, and so it lives without asking why it is itself living.’³⁷

³² Quint, *Meister Eckhart. Deutsche Werke*, 1988, 2: Predigten:492, 3–493, 2.

³³ A very similar distinction between ‘absolute space’ and ‘space of creation’ is made in: Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (Fortress Press, 1993).

³⁴ Quint, *Meister Eckhart. Deutsche Werke*, 1988, 2: Predigten:502, 6–504, 3.

³⁵ Bruce Fink, *Lacan to the Letter: Reading Ecrits Closely* (University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 114.

³⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel And The Shadow Of Dialectical Materialism* (Verso Books, 2013), 38–39.

³⁷ Josef Quint, ed., *Meister Eckhart. Deutsche Werke*, vol. 1: Predigten, 5 vols (Kohlhammer, 1986); cf. Karl Hefty, ‘The Darkness of God and the Light of Life: Augustine, Pseudo-Denys, and Eckhart’, in *Desire, Faith, and the Darkness of God: Essays in Honor of Denys Turner*, 2015, 37–71, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvpg85f8.7>.

The theological possibility entailed by the failure of reality, the 'place' where it cannot account for itself, is articulated by Eckhart in the same sermon: 'where the creature stops, there God begins to be.' This is described in terms of undifferentiated immanence: remaining with the same sermon, Eckhart continues, 'when [you and God] have gone out [of yourselves], what remains there is a simplified One'. Indeed, as suggested already, this finds a corollary in some accounts of the Real, as a domain of undifferentiated presence, that which is cut and separated to produce a structured reality full of loss: 'the Real is absolutely without fissure'; 'there is no absence in the Real'.³⁸ What remains to be determined is whether the apparent fullness of Eckhart's One can be reconciled to the Real qua pure absence that permeates signifiers as their failure to arrive at meaning, a hole in reality.³⁹

Reality and Change

The third condition that Eckhart and Lacan share is the challenge of reconciling ontology to change, whether clinical or mystical: having isolated reality as not only constituted but also permeated by absence they must then account for how human subjects are to 'deal with' this Real that constitutes them.⁴⁰ The analysand and the mystic are both troubled by the traumas, repetitions or meaninglessness of existence and are concerned to restructure the symbolic compact that constitutes them so as to profoundly and lastingly alter the place of the real within it. Where Lacan posits the subject as the self-constituting lack in reality, Eckhart has a similar account of that which is within the soul without being of it. The 'ground', 'castle' or 'spark' in the soul is the immanent nonplace that is both the locus of revelation and shared with God.⁴¹ As that which lies outside of reality, and so outside of symbolisation, the 'ground' figures in Eckhart's sermons with a proliferation of poetry: the innermost, purest and most secret part of the soul, without time or space, eternal and placeless, without possession or identity.⁴² If for Lacan, the subject is a

³⁸ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-1955* (W.W. Norton, 1991), 97; cf. Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (Routledge, 1996), 159; Charles E. Scott, 'The Pathology of the Father's Rule', *Thought: Fordham University Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (1986): 126, <https://doi.org/10.5840/thought198661136>.

³⁹ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (W.W. Norton, 1998), 167.

⁴⁰ Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*.

⁴¹ The strongest argument for the 'ground' as the coherent centrepiece of Eckhart's theology is made in: Bernard McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany (1300-1500)* (Crossroad Publishing Company, 2005).

⁴² See the useful survey of terms in: Donald Goergen, 'Ātman, Grunt and Spirit: An Unfinished Reflection', *Eckhart Review* 15, no. 1 (27 March 2006): 17-19, <https://doi.org/10.1179/eck.15.1.nq18j55766314676>.

punctuation mark in the symbolic, for Eckhart the ground is a punctuation mark in the uppermost part of the soul and, thus, in reality: 'ground', like 'subject', is an unsatisfactory signifier to denote what is spaceless and timeless in the order of space and time.⁴³ Like the subject, it inverts the topography of external and internal, since that which is most essential to the person is not of them – but in the real, shared with God, while that which they are, 'life', is pure externality.⁴⁴

The two men are confronted by the same challenge: to somehow live in a reality that has had its insubstantiality revealed. Superficially, Eckhart seems to demand a kind of permanent state of contemplative prayer, uniting with God in/as the ground after fully detaching from the self and the world.⁴⁵ This abandonment would eventually extend to 'God' himself – and to the quote at the start of this paper. Although the person 'should first leave his own self, for then he has left all things',⁴⁶ the final stage required too the abandonment of God insofar as he forms part of the imaginative universe of the mystic. It is only in this way that 'God remains for him as God exists in his own self'.⁴⁷ Oneness entails the recovery of our own impersonal pre-ontology: by being released from the created self, the mystic is 'as he was; before he was' (Sermon 52). This is, evidently, a kind of undoing of the alienation entailed by the dialectic of creation and so a manifestation of another important figure of Eckhartian mysticism, that of return, *reditus*, the flowing back to God of that which was/is him and so the re-realisation of an indistinct unity.⁴⁸ This process of detachment and union, however, is not a fleeting 'experience', a special mystical kind of *jouissance*, but a kind of practice of life:⁴⁹ again in Sermon 5, he says, 'here I am living from what is my own as God lives from what is his own. . . . From this inner ground you should do everything you do without a why.'⁵⁰ In other words, he describes a kind of minimalist participation in the fantastical nature of reality ('I am living') but in the condition that it cannot provide an account of itself ('from what is my own'), and in particular without participating in an immanent play of demand and

⁴³ The point made in: Ian Almond, 'Negative Theology, Derrida and the Critique of Presence: A Poststructuralist Reading of Meister Eckhart', *The Heythrop Journal* 40, no. 2 (1999): 160.

⁴⁴ Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, 58–59.

⁴⁵ See the survey in: Udo Kern, 'Eckhart's Anthropology', in *A Companion to Meister Eckhart*, ed. Jeremiah Hackett (Brill, 2013), 237–51.

⁴⁶ Josef Quint, ed., *Meister Eckhart. Deutsche Werke*, vol. 5: Traktate (Kohlhammer, 1963), 194.

⁴⁷ Quint, *Meister Eckhart. Deutsche Werke*, 1986, 1: Predigten:196, 6–197, 3; Chiesa, 'Woman', 186.

⁴⁸ John M. Connolly, *Living Without Why: Meister Eckhart's Critique of the Medieval Concept of Will* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 149.

⁴⁹ See a summary of differing views on this point in: Frank Tobin, 'Mysticism and Meister Eckhart', *Mystics Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (1984): 17–18.

⁵⁰ McGinn, 'The God beyond God', 18.

reward. The mystic is to exist within the conditions necessarily imposed by reality (what the Lacanian would recognise as the big Other) but refusing its economy, practicing passivity and detachment, so that he 'wills nothing, and knows nothing, and has nothing'.⁵¹ Any 'reward' is immanent to the one-ness of the soul itself. Eckhart writes, 'Just as far as you are detached from things, you possess them, and no more. But if you think of what you may get, and have your eye on it, then you will get nothing.'⁵² Indeed, the mystic must not even know that she 'lives for God'.

Lacan's account of the 'ends of psychoanalysis', the moment at which treatment was finished, evolved considerably, but retained the centrality of the subject's position relative to the Real – in the form of death, the pure lack of desire, the fictive nature of reality (*qua* the Other).⁵³ Seminar XI presents the end of psychoanalysis as the traversal of the fundamental fantasy, not dissolving the desire of the Other but recognising its non-specificity, that any fantasy of fulfilment is particular only to the subject. This entails paralleled revelations of the non-existence of the Other (that is, the emptiness of the symbolic chains within which identity is granted to the subject) and of the subject itself, an empty residue of the cut in the Real.⁵⁴ The analysand's desire cannot, however, simply be abandoned, since it is the effect of subjectivity itself, but a certain management is possible through recognition of the limitation of its demands and even a kind of limitless love, which constitutes, as we have seen, many Lacanian theologies.⁵⁵ In this there is both crossover and divergence with Eckhart: the fragile tissue of reality is to be recognised, but while Eckhart seeks abandonment of the self for the immediacy of virtue, Lacan finds that, while the Other (and its desire) is revealed to be empty and unsatisfiable, it cannot be abandoned, since (as Eckhart also grants) it describes the necessary cost of existence.⁵⁶ The two men thus seem to understand that the cost of a *redditus* to the Real is death – at least in the symbolic, of identity – but both finally conceive the object of their teaching to be accommodation of the conditions

⁵¹ Quint, *Meister Eckhart. Deutsche Werke*, 1988, 2: Predigten:488,5–6; Eckhart, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, 420.

⁵² Josef Quint, ed., *Meister Eckhart. Deutsche Werke*, vol. 3: Predigten, 5 vols (Kohlhammer, 1977); Eckhart, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, 377.

⁵³ Philip Derbyshire, 'Lacan and Ethics: The Ends of Analysis and the Production of the Subject', in *Origins and Ends of the Mind*, vol. 7 (Leuven University Press, 2007).

⁵⁴ Anne Dunand, 'The End of Analysis (II)', in *Reading Seminar XI: Lacan's Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: The Paris Seminars in English*, ed. Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink, and Maire Jaanus (SUNY Press, n.d.), 254.

⁵⁵ Anne Dunand, 'The End of Analysis (I)', in *Reading Seminar XI: Lacan's Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: The Paris Seminars in English*, ed. Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink, and Maire Jaanus (SUNY Press, n.d.), 247.

⁵⁶ Dunand, 247–48.

of the real, whether to manage the subject's suffering or the soul's sinfulness. It is significant, however, that both describe it as a rejection, or management, of a fictional coherence in reality for the real nothing (ground; subject) that constituted them in the first place: 'poverty' for Eckhartian mystic; 'destitution of the subject' for Lacan.

The late Lacan, however, posits an end of analysis in the artifice of the *sinthome*, the reknitting of reality and the Real in a mode of enjoyment that is not subservient to the Other. The development evidently has major consequences for this paper's argument: now, freedom and responsibility are a question of the personal determination of 'style', the analysand is engaged in (self) creation rather than alienated into reality, and there is not a simple 'dealing with' the originary nothing of the subject. If mystic theology paralleled the structuralist Lacan, now it is Kirkegaardian self-constituting subject that appears as the most obvious theological parallel; from 'living without why' to (retro)actively installing a why.⁵⁷ This complex subject must lie beyond the boundaries of this article, however. This tour through the overlaps in the ontological and anthropological structures shared by Eckhart and Lacan is intended, however, only to prepare the ground for a theology of the subject that does not have to give up on the real as a site of true alterity. The question is, whether, once the Real is affirmed only as the pure *différance* immanent to reality itself, the God of the Real must either evaporate or exchanges ek-sistence for existence. The rest of this essay is concerned with tracing the unitive real 'without fissure' through Eckhart's Trinitarian theology and his account of divine union, and, to anticipate my conclusion, to search it for the real *qua* hole of Seminar XXIII.

Eckhart and Birth

The key figure Eckhart uses for divine union is that of 'the birth of God in the soul', in the vacancy that is in without being part of reality: 'God the Father gives birth to his Son in the ground of the soul and in its Being, and thus unites himself to it'.⁵⁸ The point of spiritual poverty, or refusing participation in the big Other, is to make possible (the awareness of) such a birth.⁵⁹ This reveals, on the one hand, the human's originary, pre-ontological and impersonal essence in a single pre-creation Oneness (from which the Trinity itself issues); and, on the other, her participation in this Trinitarian drama, since as God

⁵⁷ The central argument of: Pound, *Theology, Psychoanalysis and Trauma*.

⁵⁸ Georg Steer, ed., *Meister Eckhart. Deutsche Werke*, vol. 4,1: Predigten (Kohlhammer, 2003), 350, 85–352, 93.

⁵⁹ Richard Kieckhefer argues that Eckhart's listeners were to realise an always already state of union with God, 'a state they both possess and strive for'.

births his Son in the ground of the mystic's soul so does she, with God, birth the same Son. For Eckhart, the birth of God in the soul, the productive flowing back (and forth), is also the interior nature of the Trinity itself, since the act is one that takes place in Godself: 'The Father gives birth to his Son without ceasing, and I say more: He gives birth to me as his Son, and as the same Son.'⁶⁰ Žižek argues that, in Eckhart, 'God himself can relate to himself only through man' but, if this interior process makes union possible (since the ground is 'mine' too), it does not require it.⁶¹ My argument, as will be developed shortly, is that, although, as Reiner Schürmann argues, 'one's [human] being has a center outside of it, in God, God's [being] too has a corresponding eccentricity', pace Žižek, this is not a symmetrical eccentricity in the human.⁶² The birth of the Son in the soul is not, as it were, a human process but a divine one in which the soul participates fully. This dual emphasis on birth into and unity with the ground, in a single non-temporal act, is the critical claim here. Eckhart's position is, it should now be clear, neither that of a God of the Symbolic nor a God in the Real: God does not instantiate the law since the law is what must be given up to unite with him; God is not 'in' the real, since he is not a static field of pure presence, 'love', 'alterity', and so forth, to which access is possible in the right conditions.

Chiesa argued that Lacan's reflections in Seminar XXIII returned to an insistence that that which is outside something is also relative to it; and as we have seen, given his dialectical creation theology, Eckhart has anticipated the same thought here, that God as creator is created by his creation.⁶³ But while this meant that Lacan had to give up the truly other (and so, apparently, the God of the mystics), Eckhart could describe instead a God who is dialectical with himself, and thus both within and without the Real: the ground is that vacancy into which God births his Son and, in doing so, is. The ground is both the dialectical negation of creation (since it is timeless, spaceless and wholly one) and the dialectical negation of God, which is God(head). Beverly J. Lanzetta describes this as a double kenosis (the soul from the world; the Son from the Father); but, critically, the process is asymmetrical since one dialectic is internal to God and one external.⁶⁴ This distinction can be made through Eckhart's account of *bullitio* and *ebullitio*, 'boiling' and 'boiling over', the twin, but non-paralleled, mechanisms that describe the relation of God to himself and to

⁶⁰ Quint, *Meister Eckhart. Deutsche Werke*, 1986, 1: Predigten:109, 2–110, 2.

⁶¹ Žižek, 'The Fear of Four Words'. This process is '*bullitio*', as explained below.

⁶² Quoted in: Žižek, 34; Reiner Schürmann, *Wandering Joy: Meister Eckhart's, Mystical Philosophy* (SteinerBooks, 2001), xiii.

⁶³ Chiesa, *Subjectivity and Otherness*, 183–84.

⁶⁴ Beverly J. Lanzetta, 'Three Categories of Nothingness in Eckhart', *The Journal of Religion* 72, no. 2 (1992): 248–68.

creation: in the first case, the principle reproduces itself; in the second, it produces something different (that is, material reality). Eckhart's *Commentary on John's Gospel*, for example, includes this reflection on *bullitio*: 'The One ... does not produce something like itself, but what is one and the same as itself ... This is why the formal emanation in the divine Persons is a kind of boiling, and thus the three Persons are simply and absolutely one.'⁶⁵ This is distinctive to the One-ness of the Trinity, since its indistinction renders its own distinction, as three, dialectically necessary. Were the Son different from the Father, a theology of the Real would simply demand the positing of a new hypostasis or order (the Real of the Real, or similar) which could be little more than a formalistic article of faith rather than that which takes place in the act of divine union itself.

Bullitio is the cornerstone, then, of Eckhart's theology, or, perhaps more accurately, his poetics, of the Trinity, the terms of which vary, but which emphasise the priority of the Absolute Unity or the One of God relative to any other transcendental terms, sometimes distinguishing the ineffable One of the Godhead from the God *qua* Trinity, sometimes positing the Father as the source of the Trinity.⁶⁶ The former is the source of the famous quote that the spark of the soul wishes to 'to penetrate to the simple ground, the silent desert where distinction never gazed, where there is neither Father, nor Son, nor Holy Spirit.'⁶⁷ Eckhart scholars have been split between those who understand the 'desert' to which the soul breaks through to be a nontheistic, pure formal nothingness,⁶⁸ and those who emphasise the apophatic tradition that understands such nothingness to be 'the epitome of all negative expressions for the purity of the essence of God'.⁶⁹ The first group describe a God who 'unbecomes', who could be the non-God of Seminar XXIII, the God who dies in the Real and, in so doing, renders himself an absolute hole of pure immanence, surrendering the Trinity to the Symbolic.⁷⁰ Mojsisch, for example, argues that 'the ground of the soul transcend[s] even this transcendental relationality [of the birth of the Son in the soul], in order to locate it there where it is the indistinct, unity as divine

⁶⁵ Karl Christ et al., eds., *Meister Eckhart. Lateinische Werke*, 1st edition, vol. 3: *Expositio sancti Evangelii secundum Iohannem* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer GmbH, 1994), 291; Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart, the Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense* (Paulist Press, 1981), 37.

⁶⁶ McGinn, 'The God beyond God', 11-14.

⁶⁷ Quint, *Meister Eckhart. Deutsche Werke*, 1988, 2: Predigten:420.4-10; McGinn, 'The God beyond God', 12.

⁶⁸ A quasi-Buddhist theology: Lanzetta, 'Three Categories of Nothingness in Eckhart', 256.

⁶⁹ Ueda SHIZUTERU, D. Papenfuss, and J. Söring, "'Nothingness in Meister Eckhart and Zen Buddhism with Particular Reference to the Borderlands of Philosophy and Theology', in *Transzendenz Und Immanenz: Philosophie Und Theologie in Der Veränderten Welt* (Berlin, 1977), 159.

⁷⁰ That is, roughly, the Zizekian Trinity: Kotsko, *Zizek and Theology*.

essence'.⁷¹ The second group can maintain a structuralist theology in which absolute unity necessitates the Trinity as a dialectical moment. Bernard McGinn in particular has argued that the ground is not a field outside God but rather a necessary dialectical moment of God.⁷² Such accounts of Eckhart's Trinitarianism quote, for example, this famous passage from Sermon 10: 'Distinction comes from Absolute Unity, that is, the distinction in the Trinity. Absolute Unity is the distinction and distinction is the Unity. The greater the distinction, the greater the Unity, for that is the distinction without distinction.'⁷³ McGinn emphasises that Eckhart's writing is not systematic here, that it belongs not to a tract but a sermon, but the observation of this article is that this most orthodox reading of Eckhart generates the most radical answer to Lacan.

Eckhart and the Other

Žižek argues that for Eckhart, 'God is [...] the only Substance', identifying God and being and leaving over the Abyss, but this is a de-Trinitarianised Eckhart, in which the Godhead is wholly disconnected from God and God wholly identified with creation.⁷⁴ Insisting on distinguishing the 'abyss of Godhead' from the 'abyss of the poverty of man', Žižek then identifies the latter with 'the primordial form of Evil'.⁷⁵ In this, however, both the Eckhartian evil – living with a why – and the consuming identification of the soul within the dynamic of the Trinity have been lost. Žižek's Hegelian solution is that human alienation from the divine (in modernity) is paralleled by divine self-alienation (at the cross but also in Seminar XXIII) so that the Real collapses, revealing itself to be, like reality itself, a sexuated woman.⁷⁶ Eckhart, however, posits an asymmetry where Žižek posits a collapse. For the former, *ebullitio* and *bullitio* are fundamentally different: human alienation from the divine is also creation, incarnation and crucifixion (it is not something that happens in time, it is time itself and everything that happens therein); divine alienation from itself is also both divine intimacy and divine-soul intimacy (something that happens out of time, in eternity). Incarnation and not

⁷¹ Quoted in: Connolly, *Living Without Why*, 166.

⁷² Bernard McGinn, 'A Prologomenon to the Role of the Trinity in Meister Eckhart's Mysticism', *Eckhart Review* 6, no. 1 (1 April 1997): 54, https://doi.org/10.1179/eck_1997_6_1_006.

⁷³ Again, with most recent commentators, I treat Eckhart's Trinitarianism as integral to his theology and not a means of escaping his inquisitors or paying lip service to Christian theology: Evelyn Underhill, *Mystics of the Church* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002), 134.

⁷⁴ Žižek, 'The Fear of Four Words', 36.

⁷⁵ Žižek, 37.

⁷⁶ Žižek, 59.

crucifixion is the critical moment of divine self-alienation but this 'event', which takes place in the soul, flows forth in ethical substance.⁷⁷ Eckhart can preach that 'he gives birth to me (as) himself and to himself (as) me and to me as his Being and as his nature. In the innermost spring, where I well forth from the Holy Spirit, there is one life and one Being and one work. All that God does is one; this is why he gives birth to me as his Son without any difference'.⁷⁸ Žižek, acknowledging Eckhart's account of divine alienation, still refuses his identification of the soul's abyss with that of God; that is, he can account for *ebullitio* but not *bullitio*.⁷⁹

Strangely, an orthodox Trinitarianism makes possible a Žižekian reading of Eckhart in which his ontology is animated by the recovery of the 'subjectivity of substance': Žižek writes that Eckhart cannot imagine the Thing and yet is this not exactly what the creature-qua-nothing, discussed at the start of this article, describes, that the tangible reveals itself to be nothing and thus nothing other than the Real qua the boiling-over of the Trinity, itself?⁸⁰ The Thing, in other words, is an encounter with the Real, but the Real is not some kind of material immediacy (of the kind Žižek would reject) or the Kantian *Ding* or some kind of substantial manifestation of God but the puncture mark itself, the territory of Trinitarian becoming.⁸¹ This might be described by inverting the accusation of Docetism that Žižek levels at Eckhart: not that Christ is not animal but that animals are (the site of the birth of) Christ. Eckhart posits a God 'into' the real, that is, the real is mobilised into the dynamics of the Trinity, that vacuum that exists by virtue of becoming the site of God's self-birthing, an eternal, nontemporal '*bullitio*' that constitutes the Trinity, and that, because it happens also in the soul (and thus in reality), bodies forth into material time and place. What is true, however, is that Eckhart does not imagine this as a Kierkegaardian, or Levinasian, encounter with an external subject or with the incarnation as a singular historical event.⁸² Indeed it seems more plausible to say that Eckhart's strategy is (one of) Lacan's, that the traumatic encounter, insofar as it is imagined, is with the sermon (or the seminar) that troubles the hysteria of the (proto)mystic with its playful use of the

⁷⁷ Pace Lanzetta, who acknowledges the absence of a significant text regarding the cross: Lanzetta, 'Three Categories of Nothingness in Eckhart'.

⁷⁸ Quint, *Meister Eckhart. Deutsche Werke*, 1986, 1: Predigten:109, 2-110, 2; Kern, 'Eckhart's Anthropology', 241.

⁷⁹ Žižek, 'The Fear of Four Words'.

⁸⁰ I gesture here to the argument in: Russell Sbriglia and Slavoj Žižek, 'Introduction', in *Subject Lessons: Hegel, Lacan, and the Future of Materialism*, ed. Russell Sbriglia and Slavoj Žižek (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2020).

⁸¹ Padusniak, 'Love Itself Disappears', 96-97.

⁸² Padusniak identifies such an encounter in Eckhart's interpretation of the Mary and Martha pericope: Padusniak, 96.

morphological possibilities of the vernacular and thus compels personal detachment. John Caputo, in particular, has argued for a poststructuralist Eckhart, whose theology was a kind of continual deconstructive activity in the Symbolic.⁸³

Nonetheless, a suggestion of a direct encounter with the other *qua* being can be found in a short passage on friendship that develops the theme of 'living without why'. Eckhart preached: 'If I had a friend and loved him for benefits received and because of getting my own way, I should not be loving my friend, but myself. I ought to love my friend for his own goodness, for his virtues and for all that he is in himself', and, furthermore this 'love of virtue [...] is God [since] God begets all virtues'.⁸⁴ The discovery of God (*qua* virtue) in my friend marks, however, no possibility of divine, or even intersubjective, unity: 'I once thought – it was not long ago – That I am a man is something other men share with me; that I see and hear and eat and drink, that is the same as with cattle; but that I am, that belongs to no man but myself, not to a man, not to an angel, not even to God except insofar as I am one with Him'.⁸⁵ The virtuous friend, in other words, discloses God – and, since he has the possibility of naught-ing himself, he has the possibility of his own divine union – without rendering the possibility of 'I am' in him.⁸⁶ Denied, then, is the claim for an originary ethics in the neighbour of precisely the kind that Žižek critiques in Levinas, in which, 'the abyss/void of the Other [is lost]: the human face 'gentrifies' the terrifying thing that is the ultimate reality of our neighbor'.⁸⁷ The friend provides no bridge to God since the birth of the Son in the soul is always already taking place, and is encountered not through the other but rather immanently in the ground of the soul itself. The encounter with the true alterity of God in the friend is described (albeit hardly as trauma) but not within the dynamics of union.

Conclusion

The question posed by this essay is whether a Real that is no more than a puncture mark, a side effect of reality, can accommodate a divine other. The answer has been a qualified

⁸³ Caputo, 'Mysticism and Transgression'.

⁸⁴ Meister Eckhart, *Sermons and Treatises*, ed. Maurice O'C Walshe, vol. 3 (Rockport, MA: Element Books, 1987), 141.

⁸⁵ Eckhart, 3:141.

⁸⁶ This is not to undermine Eckhart's apophaticism. Even if the Trinity might be recognised as the source of ethical substance, the Godhead itself defies not merely any positive ethical attribution (such as 'God is good') but ethics altogether. Almond, 'Negative Theology, Derrida and the Critique of Presence', 154.

⁸⁷ Quoted in: Padusniak, 'Love Itself Disappears', 89.

no, or rather, that the theologian does not need to give up on a transcendental God as the cost of accepting a Lacanian ontology. Its argument is that a poetics of the Real as a pure no-thing exists in the mystical theology of Meister Eckhart and that it can function too as a moment of the Trinity; that, in addition to the something and nothing of creation, there exists an everything and nothing of God, and that these two nothings can be identified, even as their dialectics are distinguished. The technical terms for these overlapping dialectics are *bullitio* and *ebullitio*, the self-making of God and the other-making of creation. It is an insight forged in the poetics of the mystical life that gives up the (false) economies of reality for the desert, only to find in it the immanent reward of divine union. This leaves room for the encounter with the other, for the transformation of reality and for an encounter with the ethical reality of the non-ethical no-thing of God himself.