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THE DEATH OF THE SUBJECT-IMPOSSIBLE: AN ANALYSIS
OF THE SUBJECT IN DECONSTRUCTION
AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

A Thesis

by

MELINDA MEJIA

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Texas-Pan American
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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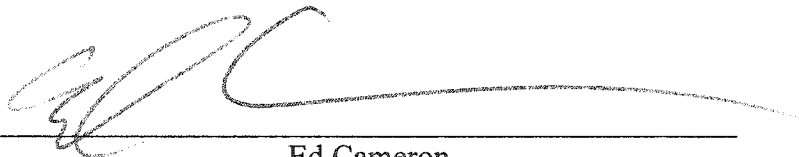
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ABSTRACT

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Referring mainly to works of Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan, but also drawing from other major theorists of deconstruction and psychoanalysis, this study focuses on the role of language in the formation of the subject. It also addresses prevailing arguments which call into question the political dynamism of poststructuralist theories of the subject.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Question of the Subject

To enter into the debate of the subject so late in the game may seem unproductive, perhaps even foolish. Indeed, surface analysis of the literature on subjectivity would indicate that the subject has come and gone. Beginning with humanist perspectives of the subject, perspectives which posit the subject as a self-aware unified entity at the center of all meaning and truth, to poststructuralist notions of the subject which herald its death in view of its dependency on language, its temporality, and its reliance on an illusory notion of center and totality, the subject's trajectory seems to be complete; the subject has lived and died. It appears that the notion of the death of the subject is so widely accepted not only in the literary realm, but also in the socio-political realm that many political groups especially those which rely on identity politics have begun to clamor for the revival of the subject and evoked a Christ-like image of it: The subject in this conception has been crucified, has died and has been buried and now we await its glorious resurrection. But has the subject really come and gone, lived and died? Is the slogan "a return to the subject, the return of the subject," which Jacques Derrida somewhat sardonically invokes in "Eating Well, or the Calculation of the Subject," relevant to the current condition (or non-condition) of the subject (96)? For in order to imagine a return to the subject,

(whether in literature, in politics, or in philosophy), in order to summon this move, we must first conclude that we have indeed completely moved away from the subject to begin with. It is only after such a conclusion that the phrase “a return to the subject” can have any significance. And such a conclusion can not be reached without first reevaluating this alleged move away from the subject, a move which is attributed to poststructuralist theorists who supposedly piloted it during an “apolitical” rampage to end with all that is certain. Only after such a reevaluation can we begin to assess the possibility and necessity of a return to the subject.

Two poststructuralist theories that are adequate for this study of the subject and which have come under attack for their move away from the humanist notion of subjectivity are deconstruction and psychoanalysis. Whereas deconstruction claims that the subject is impossible due to the indeterminacy of language or the symbolic order on which the subject depends, psychoanalysis recognizes this very impossibility as the subject. The political problematic that these two notions pose will be explained in detail in section four of this study but can now be summarized as follows: By refuting the idea of a coherent, unified, and stable identity deconstruction dilutes the legitimacy of “the subject” as a self-aware entity capable of accurately representing itself and others. Since political activity presumably relies on a coherent, unified and stable “political subject,” in the political realm deconstruction appears apolitical. Psychoanalysis on the other hand does recognize the subject but still seems to represent a threat to political activity. Psychoanalysis, like deconstruction posits an unstable identity; additionally, it makes a universal claim that may well embody political incorrectness; psychoanalysis argues that

all individuals regardless of race, status, sexuality, gender, etc. acquire subjectivity through a process common to all.

Despite significant differences between these two theories, their emphasis on language as formative, and the political implications of that emphasis, links them and spurs this study. Language as the trace of an absence is an important idea in both deconstruction and psychoanalysis and an issue which is addressed in poststructuralist theories of the subject perhaps in direct response to previous theories of subjectivity which did not give adequate attention to the question of language in theorizing the self. One such theory of the subject and what Sarah Kofman calls the “starting point of philosophy” is the Cartesian *cogito*.

The Cartesian *Cogito*

In his search for truth and as a response to the mounting skepticism of the Renaissance, René Descartes produced groundbreaking work on the “self” that earned him the title of “the father of modern philosophy.” His theory regarding man’s self-consciousness, the Cartesian *cogito*, remains relevant in the exploration of subjectivity not because it provides an answer to the question of the essence of man but because it serves as starting point for the ongoing inquiry regarding the condition of man. The Cartesian *cogito* outlined in Descartes’ *Meditations of First Philosophy* emerges from Descartes’ textualized endeavor to arrive at absolute certainty. In his quest for the ultimate truth, for this absolute certainty, Descartes meets with the question of the subject. According to Descartes, in order to possess true knowledge one must first guard himself against deception and one can only do this by doubting. If one engages in radical doubt, in other words, doubts every possible conception, belief, and perception, one will

avert deception because one cannot be deceived without first believing in something.

Ultimately however, through this process of radical doubt, Descartes asserts one will arrive at an absolute certainty. And this certainty, interestingly enough, is the certainty of one's own existence and what Descartes describes as the "correct" notion of the self.

It is thus from a position of doubt that Descartes addresses the question of man's consciousness of self (a position much like that which the poststructuralists will assume in their inquiries of the subject) and from which he initiates an important move to define subjectivity. In his second meditation, through this very act of doubting Descartes arrives at the core of his theory of the self:

But I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it now follow that I too do not exist? No: if I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed ... But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning ... he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something ... I must finally conclude that this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind. (16-17)

In other words, what Descartes is saying is "my consciousness implies my existence; my existence anticipates my consciousness." This is the Cartesian *cogito*: I think therefore I am; *cogito ergo sum*. Descartes finds certainty in his doubt(ing), and according to his own speculation it is through his doubting that he performs his humanity and the essence of his existence. For even if one assumes that the entire external world is an illusion (including one's own body) one certainty remains: At the moment of the *cogito* one can doubt everything except that one is doubting. For if one attempts to doubt the existence

of this doubting thing, one can only but encounter the doubting thing. In doubting one's consciousness of self one only repeats the manifestation of consciousness. It is this impossibility of separating the act of doubting from the doubting thing, the impossibility of separating the thinking from the thinker that indicates that the essence of man is thought, that man is essentially and uniquely "a thinking thing." Descartes claim therefore is that he cannot be deceived into thinking that he does not exist. The belief in one's own existence is invulnerable to deception.

According to Descartes, it is thought alone that is the essence of man, what is inseparable from him. One ceases to exist when one ceases to think, not when one ceases to perceive or when one ceases to imagine. Perception and imagination as Descartes explains are only byproducts of thought (of the mind) made accessible through the body:

For example, I am now seeing light, hearing a noise, feeling heat. But I am asleep, so all this is false. Yet I certainly *seem* to see, to hear, and to be warmed.

This cannot be false; what is called 'having a sensory perception' is strictly just this, and in this restricted sense of the term it is simply thinking. (19)

But true knowledge comes from pure thought uncorrupted by the body. Descartes posits subjectivity as the result of this separation of mind from body as well as from all that is the external world. The subject can only realize his subjectivity after he recognizes this separation of mind from body, recognition which as was mentioned before results from radical doubt. The certainty of one's existence in Descartes' theory of the subject is a self-contained certainty: "[N]one of the things that the imagination enables me to grasp is at all relevant to this knowledge of myself which I possess, and [the] mind must therefore

be most carefully diverted from such things if it is to perceive its own nature as distinctly as possible" (Descartes 19).

It is this separation of mind and body that is known as Cartesian dualism and which along with Descartes' notion of an isolated subject is contested by poststructuralist theories of subjectivity and language. Descartes' belief that nothing outside of his own thought is relevant to who he is, that the "I" who thinks supersedes all else including the "I" which imagines and the "I" which perceives, places at the center of everything a subject derived from reason. Descartes places all his faith in this process of reasoning that confirms that although "none of the objects of imagination are real, the power of imagination is something which really exists and is part of [his] thinking" (19). It is this faith in logic (the Cartesian doubt) that allows him to separate himself from the world and to achieve self-awareness. Stripped of the senses, Descartes argues, man would still be able to exist as man. Man's perception of his self and of the things around him does not rely on physical experience. To illustrate this he employs the example of the piece of wax: What one perceives through the senses to be the hard piece of wax is disturbed when the wax is melted, and yet according to Descartes the wax as wax remains because one thinks of it as such. The "nature" of the piece of wax, Descartes argues, was not "revealed by [the] imagination" nor by perceptions, but "by the mind alone" (21). It is through "judgment," (or thought which results from doubt), a uniquely human faculty, that one can perceive with certainty despite the illusory nature of the senses.

It is Descartes' belief in the separation of man from world, of mind from body, his belief in the idea without the word, that stirs up the question of language. Descartes, in attempting to separate mind from body, reason from perception, separates thought from

language. This separation as poststructuralist theorists will demonstrate is not only inaccurate, but impossible.

A Break with the Cartesian *Cogito*

Although this seemingly self-fulfilling theory of the subject is no doubt contested prior to poststructuralism, poststructuralism's emphasis on the role of language in the formation of the subject presents an interesting occasion for the reconsideration of the Cartesian *cogito*. Poststructuralism rejects the Cartesian notion that an individual can map the structure of his own existence by separating himself from the world and from his perceptions, by engaging in "pure thought." The structure of one's existence, according to poststructuralist theory, depends on language because thought depends on language. Therefore, thinking, which according to Descartes is the manifestation of one's existence and of the ultimate certainty, cannot be pure. It is inevitably corrupted by language. For, it is only through this use of a *shared* symbolic order that one can formulate thoughts and acquire knowledge: knowledge of the self, knowledge of others, knowledge of the world. But because language and the knowledge it delivers occurs only by and through the collaboration with an other, any meaning that results rather than articulate an essence is only just that — a result, a construction, an outcome — something that *comes out of* language, not something that is essentially there and *comes through* in language, something that is not in and of itself, but *is* in the other. Thus, Descartes' insistence on an essence of the subject separated from the social structure and the symbolic order is unfeasible. The poststructuralist subject, especially Jacques Lacan's subject of the unconscious, manifests the interrelations of the subject and the symbolic, of the private and the social, interrelations which Descartes fails to consider or acknowledge.

As Kofman points out in “Descartes Entrapped,” Descartes bases his final discovery, that of the *cogito*, on his belief in pure reason (or what Kofman calls “rational intuition”), his belief in the ability of the human mind to grasp “the idea” without the “the word” (Kofman 181). He does not take into account that his progression from radical doubt to the assertion of the *cogito* (the idea of his essence), is but the result of the “unsurpassable constraints of language”(Kofman 183). Kofman explains:

Descartes fell into the trap set by language... But Descartes could not have avoided this trap, inasmuch as he needed metaphysics: for to believe in reason, cause, effect, the subject and the predicate, to believe in all these grammatical categories inherent to language, is the very essence of metaphysical thought, of thought itself. (183)

Descartes’ flaw is rooted in the belief that one can think outside of language. It is Descartes’ insistence on an idea that is perceivable outside of language that limits his meditations on the subject. For Descartes the subject is performed through reason, but he neglects the role of language on the subject’s ability to reason. Kofman makes an insightful observation concerning language’s influence on the notion of the subject: “it is, indeed, the grammar immanent to language that obliges [one] to imagine the fiction of a fixed subject, identical to itself, cause of the activity indicated by the verb” (186).

According to Kofman, the *ergo* of *cogito ergo sum* is not really a therefore at all, a conclusion resulting of logical reasoning, but what Kofman calls a “symptom” of the subject of language. It is the structure of language and reason that necessitates a subject; the subject then is a necessary fiction of life.

Ultimately, the Cartesian *cogito* whether logically feasible or not is based on a profound belief in logic. It is this place given to certainty and reason as the center of being and knowledge that is undermined by poststructuralism. Kofman suggests that certainty achieved through logical reasoning results in a state of stagnancy that simulates death: "to opt for logic is to give proof of a lack of virility of instincts, and it is, definitively, to opt for a truth that is *inertia*, to opt for death" (194). Although it may seem that in finding certainty one ensures his survival, according to such poststructuralists as Kofman, certainty as the end of movement equates death.

However, it is not this study's objective to set up poststructuralist notions of the subject as the binary opposites of the Cartesian *cogito*, (to do so would formulate an amusing conflict that would render this study fruitless). Rather, this deliberation on the Cartesian *cogito* is but an introduction to the question of the subject. It is important because it marks the point of departure for subsequent theories of subjectivity and should aid us in placing contemporary theories of the subject. As Derrida best explains, "it is thus not a matter of opposing another discourse on the same 'things' to the enormous multiplicity of traditional discourses on man... but of ceaselessly analyzing the whole conceptual machinery, and its interestedness, which has allowed us to speak of the 'subject' up to now" ("Eating Well" 108). Thus, the enduring significance of poststructuralist notions of subjectivity in contemporary literary, social, and political criticism, lies in this very conceptualization of the study of the subject. It is not a matter of defining the subject but of unveiling the workings of the structure that allows us to do so.

CHAPTER II

DECONSTRUCTION AND THE DEATH OF THE SUBJECT

From the Philosophy of the Subject to the Ends of Man

Modern philosophy was born with Descartes' speculations on the self.

Philosophy became centered on the subject, rather than on the objects surrounding it.

This "philosophy of the subject," humanist in its notion of a virtuous and rational subject and metaphysical in its pursuit of an ultimate reality of the subject, placed at the center of all knowledge, a unified, self-aware, self-present subject, capable of arriving at truth through rationality. Embedded in this "philosophy of the subject" as in all metaphysical thought is the belief in an essential, self-present truth grounded in an indivisible and ultimate origin, *logos*. This assigning of truth to *logos* is termed *logocentrism* and is the core of poststructuralist critiques of philosophy, language and subjectivity.

Poststructuralism emerged in France during the post World War II era as both an expansion of and a departure from structuralism, a previous theoretical movement which posits language as a fixed structure of symbols that derive meaning from difference. Although structuralism recognizes that meaning is a result of social construction, it attributes without contestation this ordering of meaning to a logical and universal system of hierarchical binary oppositions where the "first" term (good for example) is defined in contrast to a "second" and inferior term (evil). This structure then functions as a system

of exclusion where meaning is possible through a violent separation of one thing from the other. Structuralism only begins to unveil the socially constructed character of language, termed the symbolic order, but in so much as it upholds a “logical” and “universal” structure based on exclusion it continues to privilege reason, universality and presence over non-reason, locality, and absence. In response to this, poststructuralist theorists argue that although in fact language is socially constructed, it is not governed by a universal structure that we can so simply master and understand. Rather, the symbolic order functions by local and shifting differences. Although within poststructuralism different theories emerge, not all in agreement, all are founded on a critique of structuralism. One of these theories is deconstruction, a theory of language and literature, but also a philosophical and political critique. Mostly developed by Jacques Derrida, deconstruction calls into question this structure of thought of Western philosophy based on reason and centered on the subject. According to Rosemarie Tong, “Deconstructionists question the two most basic assumptions of Western thought: namely, that there is an essential unity of self through time and space termed *self-identity* and that there is an essential relationship between language and reality termed *truth*” (95).

Both of these assumptions of Western philosophy, which deconstruction questions, are crucial in the study of the subject. Challenging Western philosophy’s assumption that the self is a unified entity can only be effective if the question of language is addressed first. Language analysis provides a starting point for understanding social relations and the social being. It is through deconstruction’s confrontation with Western philosophy’s assumption “that there is an essential relationship between language and reality termed *truth*” that one can begin to envision

not only the instability of the symbolic order, but also the instability of its center, the unified and self-present subject. For this reason a discussion of deconstruction's notion of language is appropriate.

According to deconstructive theory, multiple and contingent meanings are suppressed by a socially constructed system of hierarchical binary oppositions. Meaning is fixed and limited based on the idea that it is derived from a pure and true origin which we can somehow perceive through language. Deconstruction contends not so much that there is no such origin, no essence to anything, no physical world, but that we are incapable of tuning into that "essence," that "reality," through language or reason because these (language and reason) are a result of human interaction, a construction not based on a known essence, but rather on the unknown. By questioning the privileged term in binaries such as speech/writing, presence/absence, and mind/body, Derrida and theorists of deconstruction aim not to reverse the binaries and replace one truth with another, but to displace them, to show that meaning is plural, its borders fluid and always in flux. Deconstruction posits the idea that there is no essential truth at the center of meaning and knowledge and that the only truth we can arrive at through language is a cultural/social truth constructed under specific conditions and for specific circumstances.

In a move akin to Descartes' radical doubt, deconstruction doubts as well; however, deconstruction doubts what according to Kofman, Descartes' neglected to doubt by theorizing the *cogito*, by putting it into words: Deconstruction questions language's ability to signify things determinately, it's ability to identify and name the essence of things. Language fails as a medium for truth, essence, and reality. It never quite points at what is, but at what is not. Derrida elaborates this notion of language in

his address to the Société française de philosophie in 1968 entitled *Différance*.

Différance, he states, is an “insistent intensification of [the] play” of language (*Différance*

3). This neologism which according to Derrida is “neither word nor concept” comes

from the joining of the two meanings of the French word *differer*, “to differ” by

identifying a *space* between things, and “to defer” by identifying *time* between things.

Différance is the necessary coincidence in language of spatial difference and temporal

deferral, the fleeting *locassion* (locus and occasion) of meaning. Language works not

only through difference, but through *différance* — that is, through difference *and*

deferral. It is through differing that things can be signified — we distinguish one concept

by recognizing it is not another: “Essentially and lawfully, every concept is inscribed in a

chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the

systematic play of differences” (Derrida *Différance* 11). By virtue of this, whatever

concept we are signifying contains a trace of the concept it is not. But it is also in an act

of deferral that language occurs: “The sign [is] deferred presence. ... the circulation of

signs defers the moments in which we can encounter the thing itself” (*Différance* 9).

Furthermore, any final meaning of a concept is deferred indefinitely not only because it

relies on the trace of another signified, which in turn also relies on the trace of another

signified and so on, but because the sign itself constitutes a temporal separation from the

presence of that which it signifies. Moreover, difference itself is a construction in this

symbolic structure, for if one concept contains the trace of another it cannot be

“essentially” different from that other. Derrida through *différance* is able to illustrate the

interdependency of seeming dichotomous terms. Thus, if difference is a construction and

our perception of things through language and reason is based on this construction, and in

addition if the signifier only signifies in the absence of the signified, how is that we can expect to accurately re-present, (bring into presence), the signified?

Deconstruction then insists on the impossibility of coming to any knowledge external to language, including knowledge of the self. The thinking subject of the Cartesian *cogito*, who becomes aware of his identity as a unified entity, who is the same in all situations and circumstances, still relies on language to posit this identity: "I think therefore I am;" and, what is a thought but a silent word, language whispered in one's mind? In addition, the Cartesian subject, in order to arrive at his subjectivity, necessarily separates himself from the external. He comes to the "truth" of his subjectivity only by radically internalizing himself. But this separation of the self from the other, of the mind from the body, of the inside from the outside, is ultimately impossible. The border that separates them simultaneously unites them. Consequently, one can assume that subjectivity, or the notion of the subject based on this illusive and elusive separation, is but another construction. The subject is a fabricated presence.

Within deconstruction there are several approaches to the notion of the subject, but one crucial distinction is constant in these approaches: the subject is a concept, not an essence, a social construction that replaces the what of "what is being" with the "who" of "who is Being;" it is subject, yes, but subject to the symbolic order. In shifting the notion of the subject to a who rather than a what, "the philosophy of the subject" makes the individual a "holder" of Being and thus turns Being into an object possessed by the subject. Although this may seem to illustrate the individual's subjectivity through possession, in actuality it is what negates it. For in turning Being into an object that the subject possesses, the philosophy of the subject strips Being of any essence, (Being is

nothing if not of the subject) and thus renders subjectivity objectless, meaningless, essenceless. Michel Henry, in "The Critique of the Subject," contends that it is this metaphysical problematic that both Heidegger and Freud succumb to in their theories of subjectivity. Likewise, it is this disposition of the philosophy of the subject as a self-destructive philosophy that Derrida addresses in his response to Heidegger entitled "The Ends of Man."

The Ends of Man, the Death of the Subject?

In the "The Ends of Man" Derrida addresses the paradoxical failure in Heidegger to escape the very humanism which he attempts to critique in his *Letter on Humanism*.

Derrida poses the problem as such:

What must hold our interest, beyond the justifications which, as a matter of fact, are most often insufficient, is the kind of profound justification, whose necessity is subterranean, which makes the Hegelian, Husserlian, and Heideggerian critiques or *de-limitations* of metaphysical humanism appear to belong to the very sphere of that which they criticize or de-limit. ("Ends of Man" 119)

It is, according to Derrida, the question of man asked and answered eschatologically (in view of theological speculations of death and the end of the world) and teleologically (in view of theories regarding the science of 'ends') in Husserl and Hegel that lead to the amalgamation of metaphysics and humanism: "*The thinking of the end of man, therefore, is always already prescribed in metaphysics, in the thinking of the truth of man*" (Derrida "The Ends of Man" original emphasis 121). Therefore, to think of man, to theorize man, is to think of both his death (eschatology and humanism) and his ultimate truth (teleology and metaphysics). It is this type of speculation on man that Derrida claims is

metaphysically “organized by a dialectics of truth and negativity” and which is articulated through “the first person plural” in the *we* of Heidegger’s *Letter on Humanism* and *Being and Time* (“The Ends of Man” 121).

Heidegger’s thought of man fails to move away from humanism and metaphysics. The *Dasein* (the Being-there) in Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, in asking the question of Being implies that on some level the answer is already understood by the interrogator. It is the tertiary structure of the question of Being that lies at the core of this presupposition. Heidegger’s notion of the question of Being is detailed by Derrida:

And I recall that according to Heidegger the formal structure of the question, of any question, must be composed of three instances: the *Gefragte*, that which is asked about, here the meaning of Being; the *Erfragte*, that which is to be found out insofar as it is properly targeted by a question, the meaning of Being as what is questioned; finally the *Befragte*, that which is interrogated, the being that will be interrogated, to which will be put the question of the meaning of Being.

(Derrida “The Ends of Man” 125)

But the presuppositions that lie in this particular question, the question of Being, depend on the “finding out” of a presence, be it as “the meaning of Being,” as “the meaning of Being as what is questioned,” or as “the being which will interrogated.” Derrida thus contends that what dictates the answer to this question is rooted inescapably in metaphysics. The answer to the question of being is governed by “the principle of presence and of presence in self-presence, such as it is manifested to the being and in the being that *we* are” (Derrida “The Ends of Man” 125). Both the question and the answer to the question are governed by “this absolute proximity of the (questioning) being to

itself, this familiarity of the being ready to understand Being" (Derrida "The Ends of Man" 125). *Dasein* already *possesses*, as Heidegger posits, some understanding of itself through this proximity; Being, again as with metaphysical conceptions of the subject, is reduced to an object. It is this conception of the subject and of Being that entangles Heidegger's *Dasein* in the humanist and metaphysical philosophy of the subject, philosophy which in its conjecture of Being as an object of the subject negates that which it attempts to ascertain.

Michel Henry further explains this deconstructive notion that begins to point not to the death of the subject as much as to its non-existence:

...the Being of the subject is classed as the object of a representation, an object that, on the one hand presupposes this subject and, on the other, never contains by itself, insofar as it is represented, any *reality*... Thus the foundation of any conceivable Being is stricken with a profound ontological indigence that prevents us from attributing to Being itself any kind of Being. Like it or not, it is the philosophy itself that has raised the most serious objection to the subject, to the point of rendering its very existence problematic. (159)

Deconstruction in this way, especially in Derrida's "The Ends of Man," heralds the death of philosophy not because the subject is dead, but because the philosophy of the subject never birthed the subject in the first place. The philosophy of the subject then as Henry illustrates deconstructs itself:

[It] is at the very moment when philosophy sees itself clearly as a philosophy of the subject that the foundation on which it explicitly and thematically bases itself, and which it systematically endeavors to elaborate, escapes it and, slipping from

its grasp, tips over into the void of inanity. (158)

The subject according to this reading of Heidegger and of Western philosophy is nothing more than the unborn child of metaphysics, aborted before its birth, dead only in that sense.

Who Comes After the Subject?

In view of the aforementioned character of the philosophy of the subject, the call for a return of the subject seems inappropriate. Similarly, the question “who comes after the subject” posed by Jean-Luc Nancy as the prompt for a collection of essays on the notion of the subject is problematic. First, it implies that at some point in philosophy there was a subject which is now dead. Second, like Heidegger’s question of man, it presupposes the presence of an interrogator. Third, in positing that which comes after the subject as a “who” rather than a “what,” the question as Lacoue-Labarthe indicates, “presupposes, for every possible answer, a subject” (204).

Derrida tackles the problematic of the question “who comes after the subject” in his interview with Jean-Luc Nancy titled “‘Eating Well’ or the Calculation of the Subject.” In this interview Derrida and Nancy engage in an interesting discussion regarding the implications of the “form” of the question posed by Nancy. The “after” of the question “who comes after the subject” implies that the subject has been liquidated, but Derrida argues that it is inaccurate to conclude that the subject has been liquidated by poststructuralism: “The subject is a fable, as you have shown, but to concentrate on the elements of speech and *conventional* fiction that such a fable presupposes is not to stop taking it seriously...” (“Eating Well” 102). This notion of the subject, although it does not grant it existence (in the traditional sense) still relies on the concept of the subject. It

is therefore problematic to pronounce the death of the subject if its birth (or existence) as such is still in question. Deconstruction would suggest that the subject has existed as fiction; and as fiction it remains at the center of the poststructuralist debate. The subject then in essence was never born; in fiction, it is still alive. Thus, the desire in some postmodern thought to “rehabilitate the subject,” its call for “a return to the subject, the return of the subject” is an impossible request (Derrida “Eating Well” 96). And the question “who comes after the subject” is not viable.

Alain Badiou reformulates the question: “what concept of the subject *succeeds* the one whose trajectory can be traced out from Descartes to Husserl, and which wore thin and fell into ruin between Nietzsche and Heidegger...?” (Badiou 24). This he says amounts to asking the following, “can we think an *objectless* subject?” (Badiou 24). According to Badiou, it is unnecessary to completely eradicate the notion of the subject; the subject shows its own negativity, its own objectlessness, in its endeavor to name the truth. There is a conflict between the local quality of knowing, which the subject temporarily occupies, and the global character of truth. Badiou contends:

Being the local moment of the truth, the subject fails to sustain its global adjunction. Every truth transcends the subject precisely because its whole being consists in supporting the effectuation of that truth. The subject is neither consciousness nor unconsciousness of the true. (Badiou 30)

It is in this conflict that the subject cancels itself out and in its continuous search for the truth that it renews itself.

CHAPTER III

PSYCHOANALYSIS AND THE BIRTH OF THE SUBJECT

From the Cartesian Subject to the Lacanian Subject

Whereas deconstructive notions of the subject insist on the death of the subject or more appropriately on its failed birth, psychoanalytic theories of the subject, in quite a distinct move, not only acknowledge the birth of the subject but claim that the event of its birth can be pinpointed universally; in other words, every individual regardless of race, status, gender, etc, acquires subjectivity through one common circumstance — his entrance into the symbolic order. This process, which is more an event than a development, more a condition than a progression, is detailed in Lacan's work on language and the subject. Although psychoanalytic ideas of the subject begin with Freud, as do Lacanian theories of language and subjectivity, for this particular study of the subject a close analysis of Lacan will suffice.

In psychoanalytic theory the subject who is of concern is the subject of the unconscious. Unlike the Cartesian subject, or even the non-subject of deconstructive theory, the subject of Lacanian theory does not rely on conscious thought or the rationalization of self. Lacan's subject, as subject of the unconscious, looks onto the Other for meaning, not into itself. The Cartesian subject, on the contrary, isolates itself in order to become "the master of his own thoughts [which] are believed to correspond to

‘external reality’ (Fink *The Lacanian Subject* 43). In this way, the Cartesian subject is always waiting, as Bruce Fink explains, for the moment in which thinking and being will coincide; thus the Cartesian subject is always concerned with *being*. The Cartesian subject “in thinking he is exhaustively accounted for by his cogito [is] missing what is unthinkable about him” (Lacan “The Subversion” 304). The Lacanian subject on the other hand in necessarily looking beyond itself is concerned instead with *happening* and, according to Fink, remains always “separated from being” in so far as being points to an internal rationalization of the self (Fink *The Lacanian Subject* 44). It is in this way that the Lacanian subject can exist regardless of deconstructive notions of the subject’s “failed birth.” Deconstructive critiques of the notion of the subject spawn from the idea that the subject has defined its being. The Lacanian subject does not assume to do so. It does not concern itself with being consciously aware of its being; rather, the Lacanian subject is seated in the unconscious; and because “the unconscious is not something one knows, but rather something that is known,” the unconscious cannot be objectified and turned into a possession (Fink *The Lacanian Subject* 23). Therefore, this idea of the subject escapes the deconstructive criticism stipulated in the previous chapter: If Being is turned into an object possessed by the subject, it is stripped of any essence. The subject is thus an object – Being – not a subject. However, in Lacanian theory the subject is not concerned with possessing Being; rather, these notions concern something ungraspable, unknowable, which can only be but registered through a certain failure and in such a way experienced as the phenomenon of the subject.

The Subject of the Unconscious, The Unconscious as Language

Lacanian psychoanalysis is arguably both structuralist and poststructuralist in disposition. Indeed, Lacan's notions of language and the subject stem from structuralist theories of language. Lacan does stipulate a structural theory of language where language as signifying chain always already anticipates meaning through syntax. In other words, because of the structure of language and the particular rules it follows one can predict the syntax and to some extent the content of an unfinished sentence. Language restricts itself in this way. It "allows certain combinations and prohibits others" (Fink *The Lacanian Subject* 19). Lacan's theory of language posits language as a signifying chain; the result is an algebraic formula which anticipates certain "impossibilities related to the *order*" of the chain and "records within itself or 'remembers' its previous components" (Fink *The Lacanian Subject* 19). Thus, like the chain formed by a coin toss, in which mathematically speaking, the first toss predicts the second but only retroactively, the signifying chain is a strict mathematical formula of syntax and content. Furthermore, the syntax and content of the symbolic system is not determined by some external or "pre-existing" reality that it intends to represent; instead, it is determined by the system itself which remembers what *is* before in order to produce what *was* after. The signifying chain, like Derrida's notion of *différance*, is by definition always moving, always chasing the future. Words (signifiers) are not chosen to match an already given thing (signified); rather, they are chosen in relation to each other. Lacanian psychoanalysis thus "rebukes any strictly referential theory of language whereby each word uttered would have a strict one-to-one relation with a thing existing in 'reality'" (Fink *The Lacanian Subject* 15). It is here that Lacan's theories of language move away

from structuralism. In addition, although in Lacanian theory language is very much a structure, unlike in structuralism the subject is not at the center of this structure controlling the way it functions; the subject is not the cause and agent of the symbolic structure. Instead, the subject is born into this structure.

Language precedes the individual. Language is already there functioning in a community of others before the child and potential subject is born. The child thus is born into a world where language is just waiting to mark him. His parents have chosen a name, talked about him, and like a link in the signifying chain, they partly determine what place the individual will take in the community. His parents, like the individual were also born into this discourse their name and place predetermined. This discourse constitutes, as Lacan explains, the "Other as language." The individual entering into this foreignness must find a way to communicate his needs in order to survive as part of the community. But the discourse which the individual is obliged to use in order to communicate is not his own. His very desires are shaped by the mold of language into which the individual enters. The desires articulated then are not so much the desires of the individual, but those that the Other as language allows him to articulate. Fink explains that more radical still is Lacan's notion that desires or needs cannot truly be known prior to the assimilation of language:

one cannot even say that a child *knows* what it wants prior to the assimilation of language: when a baby cries, the *meaning* of that act is provided by the parents or caretakers who attempt to name the pain the child seems to be expressing (e.g., 'she must be hungry')...its meaning is imposed, as it were, by the way in which it is interpreted by the child's parents. If a parent responds to its baby's crying with

food, the discomfort, coldness, or pain will retroactively be determined as having 'meant' hunger, as hunger pangs. One cannot say the true meaning behind the baby's crying was that it was cold, because meaning is an ulterior product...

Meaning in this situation is thus determined not by the baby but by other people, and on the basis of the language they speak (Fink *The Lacanian Subject* 6).

It is in this way that the desire of the Other, directly personified by the parents and more specifically by the mother, leaks into the individual forming the unconscious as Other.

The Other as Fink clarifies "gets inside of us" in the form of language (Fink *The Lacanian Subject* 5).

The Name-of-the-Father

Before we continue to assess the role of language in the Lacanian subject it is important to understand how the individual acquires language and its subjectivity according to psychoanalytic theory. In *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, Fink provides an excellent explanation of the individual's accession to the symbolic order. The key element in the acquisition of language and the formation of an individual's subjectivity is what Lacan calls *Nom-du-Pere* (the Name-of-the-Father). Before the individual enters the symbolic order he finds himself in a "pre-symbolic" state, which is the symbiotic relationship of child and mother. This state belongs in the realm of the real, which however necessary for this formulation of the subject, does not exist until it is lost. Fink explains it thus:

Existence is a product of language: language brings things into existence (makes them part of human reality), things which had no *existence* prior to being ciphered, symbolized, or put into words... The real, therefore, does not *exist*,

since it precedes language; Lacan reserves a separate term for it, borrowed from Heidegger: it 'ex-sists.' (Fink *The Lacanian Subject* 25).

It is the Name-of-the-father that will bring things into existence, including this realm of the real, this "pre-symbolic" state.

But before this move to the symbolic order is made, before language, the individual has already, during what Lacan calls the mirror stage, begun to organize "the early chaos of perceptions and sensations, feelings and impressions" into some type of structure (Fink *A Clinical Introduction* 88). This structure is the imaginary register, spurred by the child's visual recognition of his image in the mirror and his parents' reaction to that recognition. Constituting "visual images, auditory, olfactory, and other sense perceptions of all kinds, and fantasy," the imaginary register forms prior to the individual's internalization of the paternal function and serves as a structural foundation for the symbolic register (Fink *A Clinical Introduction* 88). In the imaginary the "real" is perceived but does not have meaning.

It is the paternal function that will enable the individual to make the move from an "imaginary" relation to the "real" (which proves overwhelming as in the case of the psychotic) to a symbolic (*meaningful*) relation to it. If the father's "No" is internalized, the imaginary register characterized by affect is "restructured, rewritten, or 'overwritten' by the symbolic" and the individual becomes a subject of language (Fink *A Clinical Introduction* 88). The Name-of-the-Father as formulated by Lacan is the father's prohibition enacted verbally in the father's "No" or symbolically through the father's name/authority in the early stages of the individual's childhood. It is through this prohibition, through the interruption caused by what is also known as the paternal

function, that the individual is separated from the mother and their homeostatic relationship disintegrated: The paternal function comes between the mother and the child, "stopping the child from being drawn altogether to or into the mother" and introducing him to the symbolic order (Fink *A Clinical Introduction* 80). It is what protects the individual from the overwhelming flow of the mOther's desire, but it is also that which perpetuates the symbolic order. For as the individual internalizes the meaning of this prohibition, as he separates from his mother and becomes a subject, he reaches desperately for something with which to compensate for his loss, for something to signify the absence of someone to which he has been barred access, and what he finds in his hands is the signifier. This is his entrance into the symbolic order. This symbolic order aided by the law of the father invents the subject as an effect of itself.

The Cut of the Signifier

The paternal function serves as the first signifier, the signification of the Other, and once taken up by the individual it initiates the individual's ability to use language to make meaning; or more appropriately, it situates him within the signifying chain so that language can use him to make meaning. At the moment in which the individual articulates the mother's absence he enters the symbolic order and becomes a function of the signifying chain. The subject becomes a signifier himself: He signifies the mother's absence, stands in place of the lack, is subject because of the separation. But in so much as his subjectivity relies on this lack, the Lacanian subject is without "subject-matter," an empty signifier like all other signifiers whose meaning can only be determined by its place in the signifying chain and whose place has been granted by an inaccessibility to the real.

Lacan's notion of language and the subject may in many ways resemble structuralism. Structuralism is definitely his point of departure, but in so much as he posits this differential and deferential signifier within the signifying chain, Lacan makes his poststructuralist move. Likewise, in situating the subject as the signifier of signifiers Lacan denotes the subject as absence, a lack whose place is determined and whose truth is deferred by the signifying chain. As a result of this inevitable status of the subject, the subject in/of the symbolic order is fundamentally split; he is at once the centered ego and the displaced unconscious, the enunciating subject and the enunciated subject, the speaking and the spoken, the signifier and the signified. The complicated relationship between the signifier and the subject is further described by Linda Belau in "Trauma and the Material Signifier":

The signifier comes into being only insofar as it marks the subject with a certain lack; something of an originary or primal plenitude is lost. This, according to psychoanalysis, is always imagined as the symbiotic relationship between the child and the mother... The signifier is thus characterized by an inadequacy which is registered through the subject in two ways: First, the signifier cuts the subject, leaving a gap or lack. This lack splits the subject. The subject also registers the signifier's inadequacy insofar as it is the *signifier* that is inadequate to fill in or make a complete restitution for the traumatic loss the subject suffers as its split.

The signifier, that is, cannot make good the loss the subject suffers, a loss inaugurated by the advent of the signifier and the entry into the symbolic. (2)

The signifier, as explained by Belau, is inadequate (also insufficient) because it is unable to restore presence. The signifier can neither fill the gap of the split subject nor fully

compensate for the traumatic loss of the subject. But it is this cut which manifests the subject and also this cut which generates our notions of a “presymbolic” origin that we cannot know nor return to. It is important that we do not confuse this with a prohibition. It is not that we *may not* return to this “presymbolic origin”- that would entail prohibition; rather, in so much as the origin was only made manifest after the cut of the signifier, the lost origin only perceived after it was already lost through the symbolic, the subject *cannot* return to it. Belau explains, “the ‘origin’ that the subject supposedly loses never actually precedes his entry into the symbolic but is, instead, *produced* by the very symbolic it supposedly generates...This is how the subject’s ‘origins’ are retroactively posited in repetition”(3). Slavoj Zizek elucidates this impossibility of the subject in *Tarrying with the Negative*:

The paradox of self-consciousness is that *it is possible only against the background of its own impossibility*: I am conscious of myself only insofar as I am out of reach to myself qua the real kernel of my being (‘I or he or it (the thing) which thinks’)... the very notion of self-consciousness implies the subject’s self-decenterment, which is far more radical than the opposition between subject and object. (original emphasis 15).

The “Thing which thinks” is inaccessible to itself. In order for the subject to “know itself,” it must “not know” completely. That is, some Thing always remains beyond its reach, a reach which is at once made possible and limited by the signifier.

The Return of the Subject

This is how in psychoanalysis the subject can be experienced, only retroactively. It is given an impossible essence; it either *exists* in lack, which in turn means it has no

substance, or it *does not exist* at all, an unimaginable plenitude in a realm out of our reach. Impossible to retrieve, the subject of psychoanalysis can only be supposed in the repetition of a failed experience — the failure to signify the “pre-symbolic” essence of the subject. The psychoanalytic subject is a paradox: it comes into view by disappearing into the signifying chain; it asserts itself by denying its Other, which is always also its self. Thus we arrive at the return of the subject once more; only here the return of the subject is justified, for it is only in the anticipated return of the subject, missed and deferred, that the subject can exist: “being unable to close on anything but its own scansion, in other words, failing an act in which it would find its certainty — [the subject] refers back only to its own anticipation in the composition of the signifier, which is in itself meaningless [*insignificante*]” (Lacan “The Subversion” 292).

CHAPTER IV

THE POLITICAL AND THE POSTSTRUCTURALIST SUBJECT

The Political and Poststructuralism

It is surprising that the political potential of poststructuralist theories of subjectivity, theories which emerged in an act of resistance against the existing conjectures of Western philosophy (political if just in that sense), is continually questioned. Considering that such theories endeavor to uncover not the “essence” of the subject, but the workings of the structure in which the subject functions, a structure which inarguably relies and operates on power and authority and more importantly on exclusion, one would assume that the political potential of such theories is obvious and incontestable. Poststructuralism formulates the notion of the subject by carefully considering the influence of language, discourse and society/culture on the individual. Indeed, instead of positing the subject as an isolated, self-aware, self-made entity, poststructuralist theories of subjectivity explore the subject in its social and thereby political context. However, poststructuralist theories of subjectivity, in particular deconstruction and psychoanalysis, have remained under suspicion in regard to their political potency. These theories have been condemned by various social, political and literary movements as politically inept and socially inaccurate; movements (especially those based on “identity politics”) contend that such theories of subjectivity are only

relevant on a theoretical level, not on the level of political action, and that their place is in literary studies and not in the social sphere. One can recognize a binary at work (the political vs. the theoretical) in these speculations regarding poststructuralist theories of the subject; but this set up and its significance will be addressed briefly in the next chapter.

Before addressing and responding to the criticism against the political viability of deconstruction and psychoanalysis it is important to outline, at least in a general manner, what this criticism entails and where it is coming from. Although surely deconstruction and psychoanalysis have been censured by theorists and writers of other disciplines this study focuses mainly on the arguments made against these theories by literary and social movements that are also distinctly political, in particular feminism and postcolonialism or subaltern studies. Such movements, those concerned with the experience of marginal groups, may find value in what has been termed in recent decades “identity politics.”

Identity Politics and the Subject

The phrase “identity politics” is an outcome of the surge of large-scale politically driven social movements of the second-half of the twentieth century. Among these movements were “second-wave” feminism, Black Civil Rights in the U.S., and gay/lesbian liberation. These movements were organized based on “identity” and as a direct response to the oppression experienced by the specified group. Partly influenced by the emergence of these social movements, similar movements surfaced in academic departments: queer studies, Chicano studies, postcolonial studies, subaltern studies and feminist studies. Both types of movements, the social and the literary or academic, address political concerns regarding the oppression of a minority group

Because it is the experience of the subject based on his marginal “identity,” especially his experience of oppression that is central in these movements, it may be relevant for such movements to appeal to identity politics. Although identity politics is not necessarily the only approach to their political projects or the creed of all the theorists/activists of these movements, there is a general belief within these movements that the notion of identity is indispensable to political discourse, deliberation and action. It is the coming together of these marginal voices based on their identity that allegedly allows them the political vigor necessary to resist oppression and to outline a suitable political and social alternative. These movements owe their political strength to the unification of a common cause under a “collective” identity.

Whether or not a fixed identity is the condition for political action is yet to be determined. What is evident is that this “theme” of the subject, this deliberation on the essence (or non-essence) of the subject, as Elias Jose Palti points out, has “establish[ed] an intimate link between philosophy and politics”(460). It is the condition of this link that is relevant in this study. As Palti explains, many social/political movements contend that “without a subject [there] is no politics, nor is any ethics conceivable” (460). He notes: “From this perspective, the ‘crisis of the subject’ would result in (or anticipate to) the current (postmodern?) break of all hope of transcending the established social and political order” and would “render impossible the articulation of any kind of emancipatory project” (460). It is this perspective equating poststructuralist theories of the subject with political suicide that is relevant in analyzing deconstructive and psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity.

The Political Problematic of Deconstruction

Deconstruction seems to pose a threat to the political projects of movements such as feminism and postcolonialism because of its insistence on diluting the legitimacy of all concepts, including the concept of the subject. As Diane Elam explains in her book *Feminism and Deconstruction*, “deconstruction persistently refuses to accept the category of subject as self-evident or natural” (70). In deconstruction, the subject is a social construct, dependent on language, which in itself is unreliable; and by virtue of being a social construct, the subject is always already also a political creation. Elam explains deconstruction’s view on the concept of the subject:

[T]he subject is necessarily always a political subject, produced by and within the *polis*. The subject does not enter into the realm of the political; rather, the subject is produced by the political itself as a way to regulate and control individuals (70).

Thus, for deconstruction the subject is more of a regulatory concoction of the State rather than the thinking, willing being of the Cartesian *cogito*. And it is this view of the subject, a view which seems to limit the freedom and power of the individual, that becomes problematic in terms of political activism. In the above mentioned formulation the subject is not only a regulation, it is regulated; the subject as the designated category for “citizens” of the State, for members of a society, ensures that the individual is acted upon, not an acting agent. Thus, for deconstruction the humanist version of the subject is an impossibility; that subject is dead (or as I argued earlier was never born). The only subject that may exist, according to deconstruction, is one whose essence is unverifiable and whose origin is untraceable because of its position within the State.

According to many critics of deconstruction, it is this insistence on the “death of the subject” or its non-birth that stifles the political progression of marginal communities. They contend that in order to be politically active and influential, in order to be a speaking subject, an agent of enunciation, a political being, an individual must have a unified and coherent identity. In other words, the only way an individual can fight oppression and prevent injustice is by positioning himself as subject, even if that means compromising with the patriarchy (or State) by privileging presence, speech, and unity over their respective oppositions. Elam explains that feminists such as Nicole Ward Jouve and Margaret Whitford, “hold that it is not only desirable for women to be subjects, it is also necessary if feminism is to achieve its political goals” (71). To define the woman subject is to pinpoint her identity and to encourage an alliance based on this identity:

[A] feminist appeal to identity also means that not only would each individual woman be a subject, but all women would participate in a common political identity called “Woman.” The politics that proceed from this emphasis on women as subjects, united in a common struggle, usually goes by the name “identity politics”...this version of feminist politics would argue...that political action is impossible without subjects acting collectively. Hence the argument that the deconstruction of the subject is a luxury that feminism cannot politically afford; no subject means no identity, which means no identity politics, which means no feminism. (Elam 71-72)

However, the dynamics of deconstruction do not recognize such coherence and unity in

the individual, much less in a “collective” political subject called “Woman.” Such homogeneity is antithetical to deconstruction.

Similarly, some postcolonial theorists find deconstructive theories of subjectivity politically inadequate because of deconstruction’s rejection of homogeneity. Antony Easthope, for example, takes issue with Homi Bhabha’s deconstructive approach to postcolonial speculations of the subject and identity and his theoretical concept of hybridity (outlined in Bhabha’s collection of essays, *The Location of Culture*), which Easthope equates with Derridean *différance*. Bhabha’s hybrid identity is a formulation of the subject not only as a site of ambivalence, but as always in-between sites, in-between identities. In this sense, Bhabha’s hybrid identity is internally and externally in flux. However, in his essay “Bhabha, Hybridity, and Identity,” Easthope claims that what Bhabha proposes in his deconstructive move is for the individual to “try to live in difference,” to remain “in a state of pure hybridity,” a state which Easthope misguidedly claims is “too like the state of psychosis” in that the individual is “between fixed identifications” (345). Easthope finds this indeterminacy, this fluctuating between identities, apolitical. He, like other postcolonial and feminist theorists, believes in the necessity of a coherent and unified identity for political action. In addition, Easthope claims that Bhabha’s concept of hybridity as having access to two or more ethnic identities is an unnecessary speculation: “the concept of hybridity begins to lose definition, for who or what is not hybrid? And if everything’s hybrid, the term would cancel all the way through” (342).

Other criticism against deconstructive notions of subjectivity include the concern that such theories are either relativistic, (only individual expression has value), or

nihilistic, (nothing has any value). In "Poststructuralist ethics: subjectivity, responsibility and the space of community," E. Jeffrey Popke quotes David Smith:

The stress on difference and particularity, while drawing attention to the specific needs of various groups of hitherto marginalized 'others', dilutes the force of an argument from human sameness or similarity, which supports spatially extensive responsibility for people who are like ourselves in morally significant respects... the moral relativism (or nihilism) encouraged in some postmodern thinking is far from politically benign; instead of being merely an intellectual indulgence of the well-to-do, this perspective helps to entrench their privilege. (301)

Indeed, according to such speculations, the "death of the subject" has grave consequences: political action and ethical judgments based on human reason and agency would be halted. Furthermore, critics of deconstructive notions of subjectivity remain doubtful that a discourse which thrives on the dismantling of power can, at the same time, empower and facilitate political action. According to such arguments, deconstructive notions of the "death of the subject" encourage vacillation and destroy agency.

The Political Problematic of Psychoanalysis

Whereas deconstruction declares that there is "subjectivity for none," psychoanalysis seems to declare "subjectivity for all." In psychoanalytic theories of the subject, subjectivity seems to be inevitable; the individual is anticipated by the category "subject." In Lacanian psychoanalysis the individual becomes subject on internalizing the Name-of-the-Father and entering the symbolic order. This event is, according to such theories, the same for all individuals regardless of race or gender. Thus, psychoanalysis comes under attack by some social/political movements for its universalism and

determinism. According to such critics, psychoanalysis fails to take gender and racial differences (among other types of differences) into consideration. Moreover, such psychoanalytic theories of the subject fail to account for the condition of those individuals who are denied subjectivity.

In his article "Subject Scenes, Symbolic Exclusion, and Subalternity," Brian Carr identifies the subaltern as those individuals who are denied subjectivity. Subalternity, according to Carr, "designates that class of persons defined as irreducibly exteriorized in the symbolic" (25). Carr deals specifically with the idea that Lacanian psychoanalysis neglects the subaltern and argues that the Lacanian subject is an inadequate speculation of subjectivity equivalent to the Althusserian subject of interpellation; neither takes into account those individuals that are not anticipated by the category "subject." In other words, according to Carr there are individuals who are not called into subjectivity, who are not reserved a place in the symbolic order, who cannot respond to Althusserian interpellation or the Lacanian Name-of-the-Father because these are never addressed to them: "Subaltern ... suggests a practice of excluding individuals from the scene of political subjecthood altogether..." (Carr 28).

According to these critiques then, not only does Lacanian psychoanalysis fail to consider this possibility, but it also embodies political stagnation in so much as it posits the privileges of subjectivity as inevitable results of the individual's move from the imaginary to the symbolic. Lacanian psychoanalysis, according to such critics, results in the following conjecture: If an individual is not psychotic then he is a subject and as such is automatically politically able; if an individual is not politically able it is because he is not a subject and is instead psychotic and as such will never be politically able. This

formulation which according to Carr is what psychoanalytic theories of the subject come down to leaves no room for deliberation. It is in this sense that critics of Lacanian psychoanalysis find such theories apolitical. The individual is, based on an irreversible experience of childhood, either privileged with subjectivity or not.

Carr finds problematic that the only category for the non-subject is “psychosis” which is in Carr’s words the Lacanian definition for “the individual who persists outside symbolic regulation” (25). He contends that the subaltern exist somewhere in the domain of the excluded, but not in the domain of psychosis; however, “within a psychoanalytic description of the social, it is hard to see how subaltern could represent anything but psychosis” (Carr 26). According to Carr the subaltern is an impossibility in Lacanian psychoanalysis; it is thus that the subaltern brings to light the political deficiencies of psychoanalytic theories of the subject. By “[derailing] the inevitability of the individual’s movement into subject, the subaltern disrupts the Lacanian notion of the subjectivity (Carr 26). And only through this disruption can one begin to consider the subject in relation to social and political exclusion:

By reading the theories of subalternity with and against the theoretical coordinates of the modern, bourgeois subject in structuralism and in its psychoanalytic rejoinder, Lacanian psychoanalysis, my aim is to qualify some of the theoretical short-circuits frequently made between the category of the subject and the political. Where contemporary psychoanalytic thinking tends to presume that an account of the subject is homologous with one of the political domain, the subaltern as she is described within subaltern studies contests precisely the homologizing work and the formal category of the subject on which it

depends. (Carr 21)

Carr contends that Lacan erroneously assumes that the symbolic affects all subjects in the same way. It is this universalism that feminist critics of Lacanian theories of the subject also target.

In "Competing Universalities," Judith Butler expresses her dissatisfaction with some aspects of Lacanian theories on the subject. She explains that she opposes "uses of the Oedipus complex that assume a bi-gendered parental structure and fail to think critically about the family" (Butler 149). She adds:

I would even agree that no subject emerges without certain foreclosures, but would reject the presumption that those constituting foreclosures, even traumas, have a universal structure that happened to be described perfectly from the vantage point of Levi-Strauss or Lacan. (149)

According to critics of psychoanalytic notions of the subject, the problem with such claims is that they cannot account for everyone. They do not take difference into account; instead they rely on sameness and universality.

Finally, critics of psychoanalytic theories of the subject may find in the Lacanian subject a subject which, similar to that of deconstructive theory, is unstable and disempowered. The Lacanian subject in so much as it comes into being through the internalization of a language that is not his own is substantially split and disempowered. Any power it may have seems to be dependent on the Other.

In the end it seems that the critics of poststructuralist's theories of the subject are making a paradoxical request. Critics of deconstruction ask for a notion of identity based on sameness so that marginal communities can unite into a collective political identity;

such critics condemn deconstruction's emphasis on difference, heterogeneity and locality.

Critics of psychoanalysis, on the other hand, claim that psychoanalytic notions of the subject are inadequate due to their reliance on sameness and universality; they clamor for difference, heterogeneity and locality.

CHAPTER V

THE POLITICAL FUTURE OF THE POSTSTRUCTURALIST SUBJECT

Perhaps much of the criticism against poststructuralist theories of the subject is a result of the separation of theoretical thought from political action. The binaries that result from this erroneous separation, (or perhaps these are binaries that are already in place and cause this separation), binaries such as theory vs. politics, scholar vs. activist, representation vs. experience, rather than articulate the accurate state of affairs between intellectual thought and political action, deter the political progress that could follow if a less restrictive negotiation between the two would transpire. That the intellectual cannot also be the insurgent or that the insurgent cannot also be the intellectual is not only an unfortunate misunderstanding but a repetition of the oppressive Western patriarchal structure that poststructuralist theories attempt to undermine.

Theorists such as Gayatri Spivak have condemned this position. According to Spivak, in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" this inclination to set up Western theory as oppositional to subaltern experience, or the intellectual as oppositional to the indigenous, prevents the development of a politics of the subaltern. The subaltern within this structure is allocated identity only in opposition to some other superior identity; in this case, the superior identity is the Western subject capable of theory, but unable to have

direct knowledge of the subaltern experience, thus, incapable of representing. But in this formulation, which supposedly protects the subaltern from misrepresentation by the intellectual, the subaltern is left disempowered. For the subaltern as original experience and as opposition to intellectual representation cannot engage in theoretical discourse concerning the experience. Not only can the intellectual not represent the subaltern, but the subaltern cannot represent itself. These are the only options conceivable within this binary. It is therefore important that we analyze poststructuralist theories in a manner that at least attempts to go beyond this formulation.

Deconstruction and the Political

In “The Politics of Deconstruction,” Barbara Foley designates the shortcoming of various attacks on deconstruction:

Deconstruction is chided for its separation from practice, its shallow conception of ‘opposition,’ its eradication of a purposive subject, its celebration of impotence — all very valid points. But most of these arguments operate from the assumption that deconstruction is an exclusively philosophical and literary-critical phenomenon and has not itself arisen from political practice. (114)

Indeed, Derrida’s “The Ends of Man” was quite the revolutionary rhetoric. His critique of the metaphysical conception of the subject and of philosophy as centered on this subject was politically inciting, particularly during the time the lecture was delivered. Foley points out that an examination of the political implications of deconstruction through a historical context “would have to locate deconstruction within the principal political movements and debates of our era— specifically, within the context of the notions of liberation and opposition generated by New Left theory and practice” (114).

In so much as deconstruction at least begins to expose the limitations of Western philosophy it can be said that deconstruction is an act of resistance, rebellion and liberation. Foley comes to the conclusion after citing numerous of Derrida's works that,

[Derrida's] language is never innocent of the relations of power in which it is enmeshed. Binary oppositions such as internal/external, center/margins, fiction/nonfiction, male/female, West/Third World — the list is virtually endless — are encoded in social realities. A political act of exclusion or subordination masks itself as feature neutrally present in language (and representation) itself. (119)

And deconstructive theories of the subject are of utmost importance in analyzing this act of exclusion and in resisting it. The basis of Western philosophy is this subject based on presence; but the belief that this subject has unmitigated control over this philosophy, and over the political models that have resulted from this philosophy, is but a deception that results from the category subject. It is thus deconstruction's attempt to unveil and undermine the sources of power and authority that uphold this illusion that give plenty of political dynamism to this poststructuralist theory.

That deconstruction posits the subject as a political fabrication again denies any "true" essence to the subject. Whereas this may seem problematic to some feminists as well as to other theorists and activists of social/political movements, Elam finds this notion of the non-subject appropriately political. In *Feminism and Deconstruction*, Elam explains: "[I] do not think that a politics without a subject leads to nihilism or a political free-for-all. But I will maintain that a politics which does not have a notion of the subject as its founding principle is a politics best understood as a politics of the undecidable (81).

It is precisely this undecidability that allows for the political. Popke in "Poststructuralist ethics: subjectivity, responsibility and the space of community," goes even further.

According to Popke, this undecidability not only allows for the political, but calls forth political responsibility: "Political responsibility is called for *only because* there is no way to guarantee the justness of the decision, because its outcome remains *undecidable*" (original emphasis 307). On the other hand, a decision rendered is the end of deliberation and as such also the end of the political affair. Elam further clarifies:

...in claiming that the political is the realm of the undecidable, I am not trying to suggest that no political actions or decisions are possible. Rather, the political is better understood as the realm of continual negotiation, as a matter of negotiation in the absence of any accounting procedure. (81)

Popke articulates a similar idea:

This 'ungrounding' of the political may appear as form of nihilism, in which all arguments and positions have equal validity, leading to a condition of anarchy or political stasis. Yet I would suggest instead that deconstruction offers the potential to recast the political on the basis of our responsibility to respect the *event of the decision*. (original emphasis 307)

This notion of undecidability and its relation to the political likewise applies to the subject. The question of difference, not only as it affects the subject externally, but internally, remains open. His identity remains undecidable. That is, the political privileges of the subject should not be determined based on his identity. Rather, it is because identity is fluid that the subject must arm himself with political privileges that allow him this fluidity. It is deconstruction's resistance to a definition of the subject, its

resistance to name the subject that prefigures a way of thinking outside the structure of exclusion. Because naming entails excluding, because it is based on opposition, deconstruction's refusal to name the subject denotes its ability to at least temporarily defer the sway of Western phallogocentrism. Barbara Foley explains: "...to engage in an oppositional praxis based upon a determinate analysis and pursuing determinate results would be to grant that binary oppositions are dialectical, rather than static-historical, rather than epistemological" (Foley 129). The subject of deconstruction must remain without essence, without definition, a non-subject. It is only in this vacillation that an individual will continue to question himself. This incessant questioning subject is more politically relevant than the self-knowing, truth-possessing Cartesian *cogito*.

Psychoanalysis and the Political

Lacan also challenges the Cartesian notion of the self-aware, thinking subject. According to Lacan, "the point is not to know whether I speak of myself in a way that conforms to what I am, but rather to know whether, when I speak of myself, I am the same as the self of whom I speak" (Lacan "The Instance" 156). This split between the speaking self and the self that is spoken is the very condition of subjectivity. It is only conceivable after the subject enters the symbolic order and it is what urges the subject to doubt his being. The Lacanian subject, unlike the fulfilled and certain Cartesian subject, is always in a state of neurosis, vacillating between questions of identity and status, and in this sense more true to the Cartesian notion of radical doubt than the Cartesian *cogito*. This split between the ego and the unconscious, between the centrality of the consciousness and the displaced unconscious, between "immediate self-certainty and its simultaneous representation in language," proves problematic in political discourse.

(Dolan 333). However, in *Tarrying with the Negative*, Slavoj Žižek contends that the uncertainty characteristic of the Lacanian subject, which is the target of many critics of psychoanalysis, is not a matter of political uncertainty, but of Cartesian doubt. According to Žižek, the Cartesian “I doubt therefore I am” is reversed by Lacan’s “I am only insofar as I doubt” (69). Thus, it would seem that it is the “always doubting” of the individual that permits it to conceive of subjectivity and subjective agency at all. In this way, uncertainty is the possibility of the subject as political agent. Žižek continues his consideration of the Lacanian subject as neurotic:

This way, we obtain the elementary formula of the compulsive neurotic’s attitude: the neurotic clings to his doubt, to his indeterminate status, as the only firm support of his being, and is extremely apprehensive of the prospect of being compelled to make a decision which would cut short his oscillation, his neither-nor status. Far from undermining the subject’s composure or even threatening to disintegrate his self-identity, this uncertainty provides his minimal ontological consistency. (69-70)

It is this ontological consistency that provides some stability to the subject. The Lacanian subject is stable in its uncertainty. And this is the paradox within the Lacanian subject that makes it particularly adept as a political influence. The Lacanian subject in its ontological consistency is stable enough to make a political demand, to exercise a political privilege; and what is more, in its unrelenting uncertainty, the Lacanian subject is an absolute (or perfect) deliberator. The Lacanian subject is anchored in his unending search and insatiable doubt. The political status of the Lacanian subject relies in part on this questioning ability. In Žižek’s words, “the true catastrophe [the subject] is trying to

evade at any price is the solution, the emergence of a final unambiguous answer, which is why he endlessly sticks to his uncertain, indeterminate, oscillating status (70). If we recall deconstruction's notion of decision and determinacy as the end of political deliberation, we can see how the Lacanian subject in his oscillation is always already politically engaged. Indeed, "what [the subject] truly fears to lose is doubt as such, the uncertainty, the open state where everything is still possible, where none of the options are precluded" (Zizek 70). And this "open state" that Zizek designates as "uncertainty," seems to be the very same thing as the political condition.

In addition, Lacan's notion of the subject pays particular attention to the subject's intersubjective positioning. As Dolan points out "...Lacan 'politicizes' the private self by theorizing it as a purely *intersubjective* phenomenon" (333). It is this emphasis not only on a family dynamics (emphasis which comes under attack by socio-political movements for its universalism) but on that dynamic as the model for all symbolic relations that makes Lacanian psychoanalysis politically relevant. In positioning the self and the family, the private sector, as a public sector, Lacan uncovers the political character of the family dynamic as well as the familial character of political relationships within the symbolic structure. Indeed, the contention that Lacanian psychoanalysis does not take into account non-traditional family arrangements rather than show that Lacanian psychoanalysis is politically inept in its universalism, shows its political potential: The formation of present-day subjects relies on notions based on the traditional family (politically correct or not) and is thus very much influenced by Western patriarchy. It is not so much then that Lacan does not account for other familial arrangements, but that insofar as our symbolic structure is still governed by traditional arrangements, even an

individual in a non-traditional family relies on traditional family dynamics in order to become a subject. Furthermore, it is in view of such formulations that do indeed exclude the circumstances of certain individuals (but do not necessarily deny them a subject position) that theorists such as Žižek seek to revise Lacanian theories of the subject. In his introduction to *Conversations with Žižek*, Glyn Daly explains,

...Žižek argues for a new universalism whose primary ethical directive is to confront the fact that our forms of social existence are founded on exclusion on a global scale. While it is perfectly true that universalism can never become Universal (it will always require a hegemonic-particular embodiment to have any meaning), what is novel about Žižek's universalism is that it would not attempt to conceal the fact or to reduce the status of the abject Other to that of a 'glitch' in an otherwise sound matrix. (16)

Žižek seems to believe that Lacanian theories of the subject can be revised to be both universal and particular. The status of such a universalism (one that would valorize a "collective" identity in order to make visible the abject Other, but that would attempt not to reduce this Other to that identity) in Lacanian theories of the subject is yet to be worked out by theorists such as Žižek. What is evident is that the political potential of such theories cannot yet be denied.

Neither deconstruction nor psychoanalysis can save us from the hold of language. But both make us aware of the power of its grasp. Deconstruction seems to urge us to be continually but playfully resistant, defensive but engaged. It urges us to take part in a tug-of-war with discourse, with society, with ourselves, maintaining that in the slight but continual movement of the rope, in the deferred energy this movement produces, one

finds the dynamics of the political. Similarly, psychoanalysis relies on a certain uncertainty of the subject that at once anchors the individual and decenters it; and it is this subject's deliberation between the anchored self and the decentered one which like deconstruction exemplifies the movement inherent in the political.

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