

## ECHOES OF GLISSEMENT

In this paper, we will examine three ‘moments’ which run through the writings of the thinkers we have been engaging while on this voyage of *glissement* over the past several months; these moments which each speak to notions of, and the inevitable contradictions within, the dialectic of subjectivity and art. The central question we will consider as we identify and interrogate these moments is how art and artistry play a fundamental role in the formation of subjectivity. To this I will add a second question which we will take up in our conclusion: Does art and artistry in fact play a fundamental role in subject formation, or is it subjectivity that plays the central role in art formation?

In relation to the questions around which this paper revolves, Martin Heidegger says, albeit unhelpfully for this writer, that “every metaphysical question always encompasses the whole range of metaphysical problems” (Heidegger 93). Thus, the chore before us is a complicated and multi-layered one indeed.

There are many interesting and important lines of flight amongst and between 19th and 20th century Western thinkers. Dialectic seems to be a common thread throughout, beginning with G.W.F. Hegel; *desire* is another, common thread, which we find as a theme running through Friedrich Nietzsche’s works, of course, as well as in Hegel, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Luce Irigaray. The question of being, or *Being*, is found, one way or another, and by one name or another, in all accounts; *Dasein* being (no pun intended), if not Heidegger’s central topic, then certainly a topic central to his project. Also important for Heidegger (as it is for Hegel) is the concept of anxiety; it is through anxiety, he posits, that the nothing is revealed, and the original openness of

being as such arises. Deconstruction is a theme we find running throughout Jacques Derrida's project, as well as in the writings of Irigaray. Heidegger takes up this line of critique (i.e., deconstruction) as well, but refers to it as *destruktion* — but which is not a *destruction* at all, but rather a line of interrogation leading to a deconstruction. Freedom is a topic important to Nietzsche, and which he surveys repeatedly (for instance, in *The Gay Science*, he writes “*What is the seal of having become free?* — No longer to be ashamed before oneself (Hegel 153).”). And then there is the fundamental and pivotal question of *subjectivity*, which relates directly to the focus of this paper.

In this paper, we will confine ourselves to a brief examination of the moments of *subjectivity*, *desire / anxiety*, and the interrelated moments of *Being*, *revealing*, *différance*, *deconstruction*, and reluctantly leave the many other intertextual moments for another time.

## I. *Subjectivity*

In Hegel, we see a point of opening (*erschliessen*), or an opening up into the subjective / artistic problematic, from which we can proceed to investigate the turns within the projects of subsequent thinkers. This opening occurred because, as Fredric Jameson suggests, Immanuel Kant's project “had left a kind of provisional limbo” when it came to the question of the opposition of the subject vis à vis his unknowable object-in-itself (Jameson 9). In his interrogation of Kant on this regard, Andrew Bowie raises an extremely interesting question: “what sort of ‘object’ is the subject, which is attempting to grasp reality objectively? Is it merely an individual, will-based urge to control its ‘other’ (Bowie 12)?” While Bowie doesn't say so, this might, I think, produce an interesting dialectical take on the Hegelian master/slave modality. And investigating a contemporary turn to the subject of subjectivity, Bowie suggests that Jean-François Lyotard errs in arguing for “equat[ing] reason with a dominating subjectivity, without any acknowledgment of how complex the notion of subjectivity actually is in modern philosophy” (11). Following Heidegger, we see a turn away from subjectivity as a central issue, or perhaps *the* central issue in the Western

philosophical project, to “the idea that subjectivity is an ‘effect’ of the ‘discourses’ or ‘texts’ in which we are located” (11), and in the role that art and artistry might play in the development of subjectivity. Already we are finding dialectic here, as we look to the tension between identity of self, or subjectivity, and that which comes under the rubric of ‘difference’.

Kant looks to our aesthetic response to, and appreciation of beauty as the method to forge stronger links between our self-consciousness and nature (and art). This is a Kantian ‘swerve’ of sorts, which connects subjectivity with aesthetics in a new and revolutionary way; Kant is in effect saying that the aesthetic pleasure of art is essential to a complete understanding of our self and our own subjectivity through our experience of disinterested delight in art or in nature.

Marx would say that Kant is constructing, in his aesthetics, nothing but a spurious bourgeois subjectivity. His (Kant’s) construct is that of a sovereign, self-contained human being. For Marx, it is not ideas that change human consciousness over time, as Hegel argues, but rather the human relation to material goods and their production; if relations to material production are reconstituted, and exploitation and the resultant misery they produce are eliminated, it will be possible for human beings to live a truly spiritual life, free from material, mental, and physical despair.

With Marx, perhaps we can find his definition of subjectivity in footnote 35, page 175, of *Capital*, where he says, “my view is that each particular mode of production, and the relations of production corresponding to it at each given moment, in short ‘the economic structure of society’, is ‘the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and *to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness*’, and that ‘the mode of production of material life *conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life*’” (my emphases). In other words, in a capitalist world, subjectivity is subsumed by the requirements of the capitalist’s mode of production; in fact, the subject is objectified, or commodified by capitalism. Through a continual unfolding of specialization, the capitalist increases productivity, and the worker is robbed of their expertise as an artisan; in effect, robbed of their being, and of the satisfaction of seeing his or her

labor valorized through the complete production of a finished product. If we adopt the view that subjectivity is produced, or even further developed by or through the artistic process, then we see here a negation of that subjectivity by virtue of the capitalist process of production.

A year before his death, Michel Foucault suggests that “the transformation of one’s self by one’s own knowledge is, I think, something rather close to the aesthetic experience” (Bowie 13). He went on to say, a year later, that “I do indeed believe that there is no sovereign, founding subject, a universal form of subject to be found everywhere... I believe, on the contrary, that the subject is constituted through practices of subjectification, or, in a more autonomous way, through practices of liberation” (13). For Foucault, then, the subject is indeed formed, or constituted, or developed through input from art and artistry.

Luce Irigaray argues for a view of subjectivity in which the *difference* of woman/women is acknowledged, and not seen through a patriarchal lens. In “Cosi Fan Tutti”, Irigaray recounts that for Freud, the truth of a ‘normal woman’ -in this case the truth as it relates to our unconscious- is in penis envy. And with Lacan, truth is to be found in and through language, in discourse itself. This discourse, upon which every reality is based and defined is, however, always a male creation, forever a male realm, argues Irigaray. These arguments, she concludes, place woman/women in a place of exclusion, and thereby concealment (or perhaps worse). Or, as Derrida would say, under erasure. Heidegger adds that theology complicates this debate around discourse (Heidegger 118). But he goes on to say that “truth does not reside in the proposition” (122); or, in other words, in discourse, but rather as *freedom*, as the “disclosive letting beings be” (128); in ‘being attuned’, or in ‘attunement’ (*stimmung*).

## II. *Desire / Anxiety*

Hegel, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, responds to what he interprets as a post-Kantian opening, or provisional limbo, which we indicated Jameson commented on (see above), with a supersession (*aufhebung*) of the subject / object dichotomy through introducing the notion of the speculative into the mix. There is plainly a correspondence to dialectic here; as there is with Heidegger’s *destruktion*, and Derrida’s *deconstruction*. There is desire in play here, Hegel indicates,

or similarly, anxiety, as suggested by Heidegger and Freud. Hegel posits that through and by Desire, which he calls a 'Sentiment' of self, "man is disquieted into action, and thus transforms or negates the desired object, [thereby] creating a *subjective reality*" (Kojève 4, my emphasis).

This also sounds very much like Nietzsche, except that Nietzsche looks at desire through a chiasmic lens, drawing a disquieting desire out into a Dionysian dynamic of becoming, which in turn never achieves any kind of *unity* or singularity of subjectivity. Nietzsche says, "pursue your best or your worst desires, and above all, perish!" (Nietzsche 27). In addition to the ironic turn of optimism, there is a certain sensuality at work here, an artistry, we could argue, that can't be denied.

Bowie suggests that "the real potential of [Marx's] work for aesthetics can be derived from the ways he offers [an] understanding [of] the conditions and possibilities of artistic production in relation to a general theory of social labour" (Bowie 273). Marx suggests that it is class struggle which will instill disquiet, or a desire, in man, spurring him into action, and further argues that our subjectivity, and our aesthetic, is shaped by a *materialistic dialectic*; that it is the class struggle against the negation of the meaning and meaningfulness of the worker or laborer by the rapacious nature of capitalism and the capitalist, and which defines and animates our very being, our subjectivity. This is another argument for the camp that holds that subjectivity is framed by, indeed developed by art and artistry.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in speaking about anxiety as it occurs in the master/slave dialectic of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, says that for the slave, "life is more frankly rooted in the world than is the master's, which is precisely why he knows better than the master what death means: he has really experienced *anxiety*, the 'fluidification of everything stable'" (Keenan 133, my emphasis). Merleau-Ponty underscores the role that anxiety plays in the realization of the Absolute for Hegel in this dialectic.

Jean Hyppolite, in his essay "Logic and Existence", also takes up the master/slave dialectic in referring to anxiety, and quotes Hegel, from the *Phenomenology*:

For this consciousness has precisely felt this anxiety, not of this or that particular thing or just at odd moments, but its whole being has been seized with anxiety; for it has experienced the fear of death, the absolute master. In this anxiety, it has been intimately dissolved, has trembled in every fiber of its being, and everything solid and stable has been shaken to its foundations. But this pure universal movement, the absolute melting away of everything stable, is the simple, essential nature of self-consciousness, absolute negativity, pure being for itself, which consequently is implicit in this consciousness (181).

This is a rich finger-painting of the role anxiety plays in and through the flux of self-consciousness, negation, and ‘pure being’. There is a lot going on here; much more than what we see in the picture of Heidegger’s boredom which reveals being, or in the subconscious anxiety of Freud. Death, Levinas says, is the ultimate negation, which “concerns and frightens and causes anxiety; [it] is an annihilation that does not find its place in the logic of being and nothingness. It is an annihilation that is a scandal and to which moral notions such as responsibility do not come to be simply added on” (342). Our death is always looming; thus the anxiety about our death never leaves us.

### III. *Being, Revealing, Différence, Deconstruction*

From Heidegger, we learn that Being, *Dasein*, in which there is attunement [*die Befindlichkeit der Stimmung*], is a “revealing, which is the basic occurrence of our Da-sein”. In this attunement, wo/man is “brought before the nothing itself”. “This can and does occur, in the fundamental mood of anxiety” (Heidegger 100). However, Heidegger makes clear that anxiety, in this case, is basically different from fear; “...a peculiar calm pervades it”, he says. “Anxiety is indeed anxiety in the face *of*..., but not in the face of *this* or *that thing*. Anxiety in the face *of*... is always anxiety *for*..., but not *for this or that*.” There is, therefore, an indeterminateness about this anxiety. “In the slipping away of beings”, he continues, “only this ‘no hold on things’ comes over

us and remains. Anxiety reveals the nothing; we ‘hover’ in anxiety. With the fundamental mood of anxiety we have arrived at that occurrence in human existence in which the nothing is revealed and from which it must be interrogated. The nothing reveals itself in anxiety — but not as a being” (101-102, my emphasis), Heidegger concludes. This is an important point. Nothing, in fact, pervades beings; nothing simultaneously nihilates. “In the clear night of the nothing of anxiety the original openness of being as such arises: that they are beings — and not nothing. Da-sein means: being held out into the nothing” (103).

Turning to Freud, we find the argument that our being as we experience it is incontrovertibly controlled by the subterranean impulses of our subconscious, and that we, as supposedly conscious, waking beings, are neither in control of our own subjectivity, nor are we fully cognizant of this consciousness, as so much of ‘who we really are’, or the manifold constituents and manifestations of our ‘self’, our consciousness, reside below the surface of our everyday experience of self. Freud famously employed the analysis of dreams in his attempt to plumb these descending layers of consciousness into what he termed the ‘unconscious’, and argued in favor of an aesthetic framework in which dreams operated. Aesthetic, because dreams are images and thoughts, “full of meaning *and emotion*” (Gay/Freud 147, my emphasis), he says. The aesthetic experience, *aisthētikos*, permeates our being (which could perhaps be represented here as ‘Being’), whether in the dreaming state while sleeping or while we are in an awake state. We dream in images and thoughts, we think in images and thoughts, and the thoughts and emotions which give birth to the images, the *symbols* artists subsequently give form to as art, complete the dance.

I would argue that the artistic and philosophical tendency at work during this time began a migration to the margins, examining, disclosing (*erschliessen*), and mapping what was not being said, what was being excluded, the Freudian slips of the tongue and unconscious remarks. This is what Derrida did through his project of deconstruction. We first find the term, *deconstruction*, in the work of Heidegger as *destruktion*. Heidegger set out to do a deconstruction of metaphysics, a

disclosing, or uncovering of Being, but not a *destruction*. Heidegger was talking about this uncovering, or unconcealment, here as *truth*. He says that ‘phenomena’ and all things / beings can be unconcealed “only if the concept of phenomenon is understood from the very beginning as the self-showing in itself” (76). Heidegger continues, saying “this self-showing as such in itself (“the forms of intuition”)), that is, the appearance, is “the phenomena of phenomenology” (77).

Derrida asks, “what is consciousness? What does ‘consciousness’ mean?” (Derrida 16). Is he referring to the same thing that Heidegger is when the latter talks about *Dasein*? Derrida says “the subject as consciousness has never manifested itself except as self-presence [...] grant[ing] to the ‘living present’ the power of synthesizing traces, and of incessantly reassembling them” (16). And this presence, thus posited, becomes a “‘determination’ and an ‘effect’”. This leads Derrida to conclude that this system of presence is no longer one of *merely* presence, but one of *différance*, which supersedes dialectical oppositions (16).

These attempts at uncovering the nature of Being led Derrida to examine why language hasn’t solved the fundamental problem common to metaphysics and ontology, which is the answer to the question, What is Being? And in so doing, he argues that language does not function as referents for things, but rather that language, words, stand *in* for things. The distinction here is that what is referred to through language does not necessarily have a presence; presence can be rethought as a trace (*Spur*) of the trace, as *différance* (Derrida 18), or perhaps even the dream-work of Freud. In other words, it’s the absence of objects that makes language, and the system of language, interesting to Derrida. Through deconstruction, we examine words and language as physical marks, not as an intentionality of their author’s subjectivity, which winds up being completely anti-hermeneutic. This means that we must abandon the quest for the ‘right’ interpretation of words, of language, of texts, and of philosophy. (This idea has serious ramifications for Freud’s work, which is based on interpretation in its entirety.) But, we should beware not take this to the point of a *reductio ad absurdum*, supposing that any interpretation is as good as any other. Rather, **Derrida** is



arguing that there is no fixity in texts, in philosophy, or anything else, including the subject; but not that one thing is as good as, or as bad as, any other. He says that “in language, in the *system* of language, there are only differences” (11). The ramification of this argument is that there can never be any *final*, or ultimate conclusions; leaving us, and subjectivity, in a process of ever-becoming (as Hegel and Bergson have previously argued), but never finished or completed. We see a challenge here to Heidegger’s *boredom* (and to his ‘nothingness’), which the latter says “reveals beings as a whole” (Heidegger 99). This process of revealing, Heidegger continues, “is the basic occurrence of our Da-sein” (100). So we see a slippage from an argument for ‘beings as a whole’ to a scenario where there is no reified thing or occurrence which can be identified as ‘Being’, but rather only on-going, never complete processes, or flux, of ever-becoming.

In his argument that presence can be re-thought as a trace (*Spur*) of the trace, as *différance*, Derrida is implying that Heidegger is reifying feelings of boredom, anxiety, fear, and even that which he calls *Dasein*. Isn’t this position of Derrida’s then a refutation of Heidegger’s project of *Dasein*, ‘*Being there*’, or at least his early efforts? Interestingly, in Heidegger’s later work, we find him putting *Dasein* ‘under erasure’ as it were, by striking out the word he has just written, resulting in: ~~*Dasein*~~. Perhaps this is Heidegger’s answer to his own question posed in a section immediately prior to the Introduction to *Being and Time*, where he writes, “Do we today have an answer to the question of what we *properly* mean by the word ‘being’? By no means. And so it is fitting that we raise anew *the question of the meaning of Being*” (40).

#### IV. Conclusion

We have been concerning ourselves in this brief analysis with a mere handful of moments which find intertextual relationships across several thinkers from the 19th and 20th centuries. These moments are *subjectivity*, *desire / anxiety*, and the multi-faceted yet inter-related themes of *Being*, *revealing*, *Différance*, and *deconstruction*. These moments cannot be considered in isolation,

as each ricochets off another in an unending flux of becoming, as I hope has been demonstrated here. Each of the thinkers we have considered, including Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Derrida, Foucault, and Irigaray owes a debt to G.W.F. Hegel, which Maurice Merleau-Ponty sums up eloquently, in his essay, “Hegel’s Existentialism”, saying that

all the great philosophical ideas of the past century — the philosophies of Marx and Nietzsche, phenomenology, German existentialism, and psychoanalysis — had their beginnings in Hegel; it was he who started the attempt to explore the irrational and integrate it into an expanded reason which remains the task of our century. He is the inventor of that Reason, broader than the understanding, which can respect the variety and singularity of individual consciousnesses, civilizations, ways of thinking, and historical contingency but which nevertheless does not give up the attempt to master them in order to guide them to their own truth (Keenan 127).

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