Text and Subject Position after Althusser

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> "a bare subject without a world never
> 'is' proximally, nor is it ever given."
>
> Heidegger

After the British hostage, Terry Waite, came back to England from five years in solitary confinement he spoke live on television and made a very revealing verbal slip. Recounting his suffering in Beirut he told how one day he was allowed a single postcard. This had a picture of John Bunyan on the front. Then, said Waite, "turning over the car," he read a message of encouragement on the back. What had brought his unconscious thoughts so close to death? Was it the physical deprivation only or was it rather the way a normal human identity had been denied to him by the others around, who had treated him as though he hardly existed at all?

Perhaps we might now see that a major weakness of classic Marxism was its anthropology: its determination to define the human in terms of a single instinct, and that instinct as biological survival rather than the desire for recognition. Arguably, then, it has been the achievement of Althusser's writing to turn Marxism away from questions of production and survival towards the issues of reproduction and identity. To read Althusser this way is to treat certain aspects of his project as residual, particularly (1) a willingness to retain a privileging of economic practice via the notion that the social formation is ("ultimately") a structure in dominance, and (2) the assumption associated with this privileging, that a knowledge of the real is available to science and its "theoretical practitioners" but not to the rest of us who are irredeemably sunk in ideology. It was no accident, as we used to say, that in the United States the otherwise admirably comprehensive poststructuralist reading lists went straight from Adorno to Barthes, missing Althusser, and it is entirely to be welcomed that serious attempts are being undertaken to make good that lack. Althusser earns the right to go on being read (or to be read for the first time) in the 1990s because of three conceptual interventions, each of which depends on the others.

(1) Althusser reconceptualizes history and totality in terms of "different times," in fact of time as multidimensional, a swerving bundle of uneven temporalities (Althusser and Balibar 94-100). I have

found myself frequently citing and attempting to amplify this insight (Easthope, *British* 16-19 and *Literary* 182-88), and am glad to note that Robert Young in *White Mythologies* (1990) gives a warm endorsement to Althusser's conception of a totality which "is never totalisable because it is decentred and displaced in time" (*White* 58). (2) Since Althusser rejects the Hegelian and (early) Marxist account of totality as an expressive unity and since that conception of an object presupposes correspondingly a notion of Man as humanist subject, Althusser must replace any form of epistemology that presumes the real to yield knowledge of itself with one in which knowledge is emphatically the outcome of production, a process of the construction of knowledge (to say this is not to deny certain problems with his own epistemological stance) (3). Since, again, Althusser is working with (and working through) a rethinking of totality as decentered, it is not merely the subject of knowledge who has to be thought of as situated in relation to a specific form of discourse—it is subjectivity in general. I would persist in claiming that Althusser's most important contribution, pre-saged in his earlier work but becoming explicit in the essay on ideology of 1969, is to rethink subjectivity as an effect of both ideology and the process of the unconscious.

From this basis in a concern with the subject, my paper will be directed at several topics. It will first take the essay on ideology and try to update some of our readings of that text. Then it will turn to review the way the essay's implications were developed into a particular form of analysis in what I would want to call "British post-structuralism," at this point offering a comment on the comparative limitations of what you can do in the same mode by drawing on the work of Foucault. Third, with a poem as illustration and with a more positive intention, I shall enter an expansion and defence of the Althusserian notion of the subject as afforded a position and point(s) of identification in and by the text. All of this briefly, and for the purposes of discussion.

Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses

Althusser's essay argues that for an economy to survive it must not merely produce but also reproduce itself. This entails the reproduction of labour-power and so of a workforce submissive to the rules of the established order. Effected by state apparatuses (institutions), submission is secured by ideology which operates to reproduce subjects, to turn "concrete individuals" (newborn babies) into speaking subjects. It does so by "interpellating" or hailing subjects, constructing us so that we come to think of ourselves as free, conscious, choosing selves (thus,

for example, when the alarm clock goes on Monday morning I say "I'm getting up" rather than "Here is someone submitting to the work-discipline"). We are constructed in a process of recognition/ misrecognition such that the single subject recognizes itself as a subject because it duplicates—reflects—an Absolute Subject (as Samuel does at *I Samuel 3* when he replies to God's call with the words, "Here am I"). The process of recognition/misrecognition "is *speculary*, i.e., a mirror-structure" (*Lenin* 168).

In a critique of Althusser's theory that should be essential reading for anyone concerned with the area, Paul Hirst proposes that this account of ideology is not fully coherent, particularly over two issues: it is functionalist in that it supposes the subject as fixed and given (Hirst 40-74). It is functionalist in the traditional sociological sense that an explanation is functionalist if it understands a social feature as an effect contributing to the overall *stable* functioning of society as a whole; Althusser's theory of ideology is functionalist in that it envisages a mode of production (capitalism) as reproducing itself in the form of classes (ruling/working), which in turn are reproduced by the state apparatuses as subjects (rulers/work-force) who are the effect of a destination for that mode of production—a process of reproduction so perfectly mediated it excludes any possibility of disturbance, contradiction and radical transformation. In doing so—in order to do so— Althusser's account conceives the subject as fixed and given. The subject misrecognizes itself in an image reflected in the Absolute Subject but, further, as Hirst points out:

> [that image is] *recognized* by the subject as *its* image. Recognition, the crucial moment of the constitution (activation) of the subject, presupposes a point of cognition prior to the recognition. (65)

In other words, if I recognize my identity (even in a misrecognized image), I am already *there* able to do the recognising: I am myself, an absolute subject, one that is (metaphysically) pre-given. [In *Making Sense of Marx* Jon Elster has developed a much larger critique of functionalist tendencies in Marxism anticipated in Hirst's response to Althusser.]

There is, of course, a quick remedy here, for both Althusser's functionalism and the accompanying notion of a metaphysical subject. It comes from Lacan's account of the mirror stage, which Althusser avowedly leans on for the idea of misrecognition. In Lacan the subject only ever misrecognizes its identity, there is no recognition and no ensuing fixity, the subject is always caught between the stability of the

I it thinks it is and the unconscious process of which this I is a provisional and temporary effect (*Ecrits* 1-7). Reinserted into the social formation, this notion of a fluid subjectivity once again oils the wheels of change, perhaps even making them skid. That "an analysis of the place of the unconscious is a vital element in ideological struggle" is the theme of Coward and Ellis in *Language and Materialism* (1977), for the reason stated with brisk confidence by Catherine Belsey with reference to the Lacanian theory of ego: "It is this contradiction in the subject—between the conscious self, which is conscious in so far as it is able to feature in discourse, and the self which is only partially represented there—that constitutes the source of possible change" (85).

A concept of the "subject-in-process" does overcome the problem of Althusser's functionalism, but at a cost which is well-known and too frequently insisted upon by friends and enemies to require documentation. If the subject is in process, if the I is only the effect of misrecognition, if this is the source and motor for social transformation, what are we to say about conscious choice and deliberate collective action, the traditional modes of radical and progressive politics? I do not expect to be able to resolve the theoretical issue and its conjoint political dilemma but, at the risk of a slight digression, I shall pursue a little the question of recognition/misrecognition.

Recognition/Misrecognition

Freud, from the first, seeks to equate the ego with the perception-consciousness system (though increasingly through his work this equation becomes qualified). The conscious I perceives and knows the world of external reality; it *recognizes* it as though from outside, from a supposedly exterior point of origin outside that which is simply given. This account of the "bodily ego" has been developed notably by Richard Wollheim and deployed by him to attack Lacanian theory as represented by Juliet Mitchell by arguing that through an essentially corporeal process the I develops as "the body registers itself" (Wollheim "Psychoanalysis" 64; see also the reply by Zaretsky and Chodorow). More recently, Malcolm Bowie in a book on Lacan has drawn attention to the fact that Lacanian theory of the I—which treats the ego as misrecognition and therefore exclusively as an unconscious process—has nothing to say about the I that recognizes external reality (18-19).

Consciousness, recognition, rational choice or the unconscious, misrecognition, "it speaks"? Recourse to an unfashionable writer may go some way to unsettle this binary opposition. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Lacan's close friend, sets out in *The Structure of Behaviour* of

1942 to criticize the Cartesian opposition between categories of the human and the animal, between mind and body, though in doing so he is impelled to circumscribe areas in which human perception appears to differ from that of the other animals (he has at his disposal plenty of contemporary scientific evidence from human and animal psychology). What Merleau-Ponty proposes is that other animals cannot perceive the object in itself, that is, independent of its context. Spiders, for example, can see a fly as a fly when it is struggling in a web but not if one is simply dropped into their nest. After citing an experiment in which chimpanzees were set the task of moving boxes Meleau-Ponty asserts:

> What is lacking in the chimpanzee is the capacity of creating relations between visual stimuli (and between the motor excitations which they elicit) which express and symbolize its most familiar kinetic melodies. The animal cannot put itself in the place of the moveable thing and see itself as the goal. It cannot vary the points of view, just as it cannot recognize something in different perspectives as the same *thing*. . . . What is really lacking in the animal is the symbolic behavior which it would have to possess in order to find an invariant in the external object. (118)

To recognize something "as the same *thing*," to find "an invariant in the external object": while other animals and the human animal do perceive and respond to external reality, only the speaking subject can represent an object to itself as an entity, as having a fixed identity across space and time. We can do so, Merleau-Ponty explains, because: (1) we have an image of our bodies as "a concrete unity capable of entering into a multiplicity of relations without losing itself" (precisely the image of the unified body that Lacan says the infant finds in its reflection); (2) we have language and can line up the sign (signifier and signified) with an object in external reality (118).

It looks as though Lacan's account of the I in the mirror stage has been influenced by Merleau-Ponty. Since object and subject are always produced together and reciprocally, the spatially discriminated and temporally persisting world of entities perceived by the speaking subject must correspond to and support the effect of "the mental permanence of the *I*" (2). On this admittedly undeveloped showing, it seems that even the I as a perception-consciousness system is more of an unconsciously charged effect than conventional psychologies concede. While nothing in this argument cancels the reality of perception and the fact that perception is perception of the real, it does tend to strengthen the claims of the Lacanian account of the ego, certainly as

these might be denied by appeal to either Freud or conventional psychology. External objects really are perceived by speaking subjects, but those objects (and the very capacity to perceive them as entities) are, as it were, one side in the surface which has on its other side an unconscious lining, so that objects in the real count at the same time as objects of desire. It is consistent with this position that Lacan should define the subject's ego as "that which is reflected of his [*sic*] form in his objects" (194). The world that I see around me (which as a neonate I could not see because the ego had not yet developed) is caught up in a phantasy by which my identity is reflected back to me and as me.

Interpellation and Subject Position

Althusser's essay on ideology reached England in the early 1970s and was developed especially in the work of the film journal, *Screen*, as a means of analysing the way aesthetic texts afford a position to the reader as an effect of discourse. Althusser, however, was rethought with Hirst's criticisms already built in; a theory was worked through in which the ideological operation of a text was assessed in terms of how it sought to interpellate or position its reader even while that operation itself was conceived on the basis of a Lacanian account of misrecognition. In a story I've tried to tell elsewhere (*British* 1-122), the project of integrating (Althusserian) Marxism with (Lacanian) psychoanalysis on the grounds of a (Saussurian) analysis of specific signifying practices ramified in Britain during the 1970s and early 1980s from film theory into cultural studies, branches of the social sciences, the study of history, social psychology, art history, even musicology, and finally of course literary theory. In doing so the concept of the positioning of the subject as an effect of discourse became qualified and complexified.

What one might call the classic *Screen* view was at its strongest when facing off a polarized opposition between realism and modernism. Thus, in realist modes of representation the attempt by various strategies to efface the signifier offered the reader a position which was produced but whose production was denied, a position as a would-be autonomous or transcendental subject therefore; in modernist modes in which the signifier was foregrounded, the reader was denied any such comfortable superiority and compelled to experience the process of his or her own construction. Further, it was argued that Hollywood constituted a visual regime in which the would-be transcendental position should be characterized as typically masculine, so that modernist and avant-garde texts could be thought of as opening possibilities to the feminine gaze. [It goes without saying that at stake is an implied position, one concluded from textual analysis, not an empirical re-

sponse by an empirical reader.] Three important reconsiderations of the notion of subject positioning need to be mentioned.

(1) In an article on "The Avant-garde and its Imaginary" first published in 1977, Constance Penley criticized the possibility that the avant-garde text disrupted its spectator's apparent self-sufficiency (3-28). She argued first, that the subject as an I always had to find a place in what Lacan terms the Imaginary order (the alternative being psychosis), and second, that the fragmentation of the avant-garde text was always matched by the spectator's epistemophilia, that is, by he or she knowing it was such a text and so mastering its proffered self-divisions. On this showing, other factors are at work in the positioning of the subject than anything like a unitary relation between text and subject—clearly the subject was already constrained prior to its encounter with the text (knowing it was a work of the avant-garde, for instance). (2) In an article of 1984 Liz Cowie draws on Freud's essay "A Child is Being Beaten" and its development by J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis in their essay, "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality," to propose that far from a film's viewer being given a single position, the text in fact offered everyone multiple points of identification. Just as the subject might find a place in the fantasy scenario of "a child is being beaten" by imagining a rival is being beaten, or they themselves, or they are watching the beating, so a film spectator's identifications might be split simultaneously between characters, between different aspects of a situation, or for that matter different objects and effects on the screen. Again the notion of a singular subject position is challenged. (3) In their authoritative study, *Film Theory: An Introduction* (1988), Rob Lapsley and Michael Westlake review the *Screen* endeavour to define realism in terms of the position of dominant specularity, as it were, outside and looking on, and find compelling reasons for challenging the belief that there is anything like a single exchange between text and reader. Instead they offer the view "that the spectator judging the text to be realistic identifies with one who knows the truth," that the spectators identify not simply with a position offered by the text but are predisposed by a number of discursive effects (including the location of truth in a particular society) to adopt an image of themselves that is locally supported by the text (178). There are clearly problems here that I shall try to unpack a little with an example.

Positions and Identifications: "The Solitary Reaper"

Classic structuralism was superseded, quite rightly, because it hoped for the impossible, to freeze the text in an atemporal, synchronic moment. Poststructuralism, in contrast, by stressing the variability of the text—that it is always read differently across time—begins to make it impossible to say anything about textuality that could not, in principle, be as rapidly annulled. Notions of the positioning of the subject by the text go some way to resolve this dilemma for they recognize both the effectivity of the text on one side and the potential infinity of reader response on the other. The concept of "the dialectic of the subject" is anticipated in Lacan's account of how the linear unfolding of the signifying chain is always caught in and by the subject's prospective and retroactive interpretation of that chain (it is for this reason Lacan affirms there is "an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier," 154). In this exchange the subject is constituted by the object to the extent that he or she is transformed by it so that "the subject is at once the producer and product of the meaning" (Lapsley and Westlake 53).

This account ensues from the Althusserian intervention, and I find it hard to see by what other means such a persuasive and forceful kind of analysis might have been achieved. Despite his retrospective claim that it was "not power, but the subject" that was the general theme of his research, Foucault's project consistently suffers from his determination to fold back subjectivity into a vaguely expanded notion of "power" (Foucault 209). Although his studies—of punishment and discipline, of the history of sexuality—present a detailed historical account of discursive and social practices, they fail to explain how and why the subjectivity should ever desire to become instituted (interpellated) into these practices. In defying the notion of the unconscious, in fact seeking to redescribe it—from an essentially sociological point of view—as a mode of "power," Foucault's work in fact becomes reductive to the extent that it ignores the challenge of this other. Aware of the dangers of functionalism, not least because of Althusser's ideology essay (as the 1982 Afterword acknowledges), Foucault struggles to inject into his account of power some recognition of the radical possibilities that Althusser's essay so obviously demands, and (as my own history here recalls) very soon receives, certainly in the work of British poststructuralists. Power enables and disables, it provokes and expresses resistance while also containing it: this overtly psychoanalytic conception of structuration and effectivity (power now sounds like nothing so much as Freud's version of sexuality) is forced into a social

and ideological matrix where it does not fit. Subsequent accounts, such as that offered as New Historicism, fail to resolve these difficulties, and only demonstrate more clearly how unsatisfactory it is to try to make a Foucauldian *social* analysis apply to *texts*.

Resistance, enabling/disabling, expression/repression—this movement is surely much better theorized on the model of interpellation in terms of the way the text offers positions for its reading which, according to the dialectic of the subject, are always both accepted and exceeded in specifically analyzable way. As for instance in the case of the following poem, first published in 1807 in Wordsworth's *Poems in Two Volumes*:

The Solitary Reaper

Behold her, single in the field,
Yon solitary Highland Lass!
Reaping and singing by herself;
Stop here, or gently pass!
Alone she cuts and binds the grain,
And sings a melancholy strain;
O listen! for the Vale profound
Is overflowing with the sound.

No Nightingale did ever chaunt
More welcome notes to weary bands
Of travellers in some shady haunt,
Among the Arabian sands:
A voice so thrilling ne'er was heard
In spring-time from the Cuckoo-bird,
Breaking the silence of the seas
Among the farthest Hebrides.

Will no one tell me what she sings?-
Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow
For old, unhappy, far-off things,
And battles long ago:
Or is it some more humble lay,
Familiar matter of today?
Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,
That has been, and may be again?

Whate'er the theme, the Maiden sang
As if her song could have no ending;
I saw her singing at her work,
And o'er her sickle bending:-
I listened, motionless and still;
and, as I mounted up the hill,
The music in my heart I bore,
Long after it was heard no more.

Long before the individual identity of the poem comes into view at all the text functions as a point representing a number of imbricated intertextual categories, each of which hails the contemporary reader into a certain identification for which the single text is one supporting instance. A schematic outline of these might indicate:

1. Fiction/Art. Present-day Western society operates with a broad opposition across the discursive formation between "documentary" and what might be called "fictional-artistic" discourses. Each acts to exclude properties and effects from the other as do the other Great Oppositions (production/consumption, work/leisure, place of work/home, duty/pleasure, city/country). While documentary discourse advances itself as legitimate, official, factual and objective, fictional-artististic discourse must occur as its other—subjective, potentially transgressive, the bearer of values, even indeed the meaning of life. Since the opposition masculine/feminine pervades the discursive formation all this tends to install the reader approaching a poem such as "The Solitary Reaper" in a feminine position.

2. High Culture/Popular Culture. As part of high culture and the national canon of English literature, the poem promises the subject a flattering self-identification as a reader of high culture, that is, I would argue, structured according to a certain economy between the ego ideal, the ego and desire, one which differs from that afforded intertextually by popular culture. The high cultural reader is positioned in a relation to the superego which, paradoxically, constitutes a rationalization for possible forms of transgression inhibited in popular culture.

3. Literature/Poetry. John Ellis points out that the cinemagoer is captured by "an identification with the cinematic apparatus itself" (41), just as the spectator at the cinema—or participant in taught courses on film—reveals a predisposition for "visual pleasure" so that

all such audiences share desire in the form of *scopophilia* (to use the more elaborate term by which Freud's English translator renders the simpler German *Schaulust*). Similarly, between the different artistic media—graphic art, music, dancing—the Wordsworth poem inscribes its reader as one who finds pleasure in the play of the verbal signifier (this poem is written in lines that are patterned solely on the basis of phonetic repetition, mainly iambic tetrameter, with another purely phonetic scheme recurring in the four stanzas of eight lines rhyming ababccdd).

4. Genre. The lyric has a specific place within poetry, although it overlaps in certain respects with modes for "personal expression" in other arts and certainly invites the reader into an identification with "the individual voice" not at all so easily available in other narrative and epic genres. It would be useful and valid at this point to call on Foucault's account of confessional discourse, for this is in fact an instance of discourse in which a represented I "confesses" an inward delectation and "movement of the soul" to an unnamed interlocutor (a movement which is erotized moreover). But from this generalized theme and into the particularity of the text Foucault's account could not take us—it would not for example consider how, in a historical innovation, the lyric genre becomes subsumed into a grouping of texts by author, so that the reader submits to what might be called "the desire for Wordsworth" (identity therefore as a sensitive, high-minded *belle âme* whose profound self-concern is masked as a deeply significant love of Nature).

5. Textual Operation (the signifier). Only now does the particular identity of the text begin to emerge and be at issue. "The Solitary Reaper" is certainly a poem, that is, a certain organisation of the signifier, but it conforms to a specific kind of signifying practice (Romantic poetry in the English post-Renaissance tradition) that attempts to efface the signifier by promoting the signified, an individual voice represented as "really" speaking. Thus the use of the present tense and demonstratives in the first two stanzas (the reader is ordered with a present imperative to "Behold her," to "Listen," to see "Yon solitary Highland Lass") implies a situated first-person speaker who is nominated in the third stanza ("Will no one tell *me* what she sings?") and finds explicit first-person expression in the repeated "I's" of the fourth verse. Together with these effects, the sustained theme and syntax imitate a personalized stream of consciousness that plausibly manages a transition from present to past tense as—within the repre-

sented course of the text—the speaker walks past the labouring woman and out of sight of her "up the hill." Insofar as the text tends to become a script for a voice observing and reflecting in the present, the reader is compelled to overlook the traces of the signifier that makes this possible and pass transparently into identification with the "I" of the poem, a version of "Wordsworth" (see above).

6. Within the Text. According to the familiar patriarchal binary in which "Man is Culture, Woman is Nature" and in which the mastering I of the look belongs to a man while typically the object investigated by that gaze is a woman, the I of this text is undoubtedly masculinized. In the text there are multiple points of identification, not only with the represented speaker and the woman he sees (and hears) but also with the song as he tries to capture it, with other human figures (the "travellers" in the desert, the implied agents of "battle" and "sorrow"), with animate but non-human figures (the nightingale and the cuckoo), and with inanimate objects represented such as the "vale," the "sands," the "Hebrides," the "hill," even the "grain" the woman cuts (presumably with a sharpened sickle). There is also a seductive identification with the woman's mysteriously untranslatable song. To be sure, discrepancies and disjunctions open up between these points of identification. Since the speaker does not know what she sings, surely he has to become her in order to imagine (in verse two) what she sings? How does the desert cohere with the Hebrides? Yet what is perhaps remarkable rather is how far the text is able to make so much hold together within a unified scenario in which a man, confronted by his other in the form of a bending woman concerned only with herself and singing in an unknown tongue, is able to transform her into a knowable object of desire he can incorporate into his own experience.

   Just as all the objects represented in the poem seem able to reflect back an appropriately consistent image of the speaker's subjectivity, so the text itself offers to secure a confirming identity for its reader. Referring back to points one to four, we might suppose that the woman's song as he envisions it aims to transcend and reconcile the differences between him and her but also (since the poem itself is a lyric) that between reader and text and (since poetry is a species of song) between text and genre, and further between genre, medium, high culture and art. Of course there are any number of strategies by which one could begin to undo this apparent unity and closure: by picking up the poem's representation of "song" and "work" and taking that back to the opposition between documentary and fictional-aesthetic discourse; by interrogating its dependence on notions of masculine activity and

feminine passivity when it is the woman's work coupled with her aesthetic production placed as the other that is the condition for his mastering and expressive experience put at the centre of the poem; by recalling that signified depends upon signifier and pointing out, perhaps irrelevantly but disturbingly nevertheless, that "Hebrides" is a written signifier that mingles "He" with "brides."

It does not matter a great deal how the proffered identifications are set at a distance. The main point is rather what makes such a reading against the grain both legitimate and necessary. In the problematic developed from the Althusserian account of interpellation, as appropriately corrected and reformulated in terms of the dialectic of the subject, all my troublesome circumlocutions have a strategic and political context—the text offers or provides or affords or seeks to secure a position for its reader, it invites or encourages or promotes this or that kind of identification. All these arise from a theoretical assumption inscribed through this framework of analysis: the text, now, in the present instance is *trying* to do something to us and always failing. The problematic obliges us to attend both to specific questions about how the text works and put its effectivity in question. It is in this respect always transformatory.

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