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The Subject and Other Subjects: On Ethical, Aesthetic, and Political Identity by Tobin Siebers;
Cogito and the Unconscious by Slavoj Zizek

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Psychoanalysis and the Moth

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Siebers, Tobin. 1998. *The Subject and Other Subjects: On Ethical, Aesthetic, and Political Identity*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. \$32.50 hc. xii + 149 pp.

Zizek, Slavoj, ed. 1998. *Cogito and the Unconscious*. SIC. Vol. 2. Durham: Duke University Press. \$49.95 hc. \$17.95 sc. 279 pp.

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In a recent seminar, philosopher Maurizio Ferraris remarked that our epoch is thoroughly aestheticized. *Cogito and the Unconscious*, the new collection of essays on Lacanian psychoanalysis edited by Slavoj Zizek, speaks to this aestheticization with the image of a subject beating like a moth against the windowpane of a social code s/he seeks to renew. This assessment is not very different from the Lacan-inspired account of subjectivity Julia Kristeva offered more than twenty years ago. At that time, to make up for linguistics' failure to apprehend "anything in language which belongs not with the social contract but with play, pleasure or desire" (26), Kristeva invented semanalysis, a procedure that identifies in the subject's "capacity for enjoyment" (27) the key to renewing the order in which s/he seems apocalyptically

trapped. But if the special effect of *jouissance* has freed the subject from the strictures of the social code, it has also magnified its tremblings. Like the subterranean being in Elizabeth Bishop's "The Man-Moth," our post-social code subject has reduced the sky to a "useless [] protection." If once all the attention was on the moth's calamitous lot within the social contract, now the lights are turned on us. In watching the struggling thing, we "see" our own awesome subjection to an awesome tale of imprisonment. Legitimate questions on this tale's power cross the mind: is it a conservative theory, after all? Does it end up telling us that we find the man-moth's beatings against the pane beautiful? Is subjection the beauty of the subject? And, if it is, why should the subject bother to renew the order that subjects him/her?

Having conjured the scene of a moth-like subject with "The Subject of the Law," Alenka Zupancic's essay on the Sadean trap of the Kantian sublime, Zizek's anthology veers from any aesthetic display of subjection toward a re-evaluation of the philosophical subject. At this point, the collection captures us with a seductive insight. Both philosophy and psychoanalysis share a subject whose ascent to logos presupposes "the night of the world," an abyss of chaos and madness. While psychoanalysis has been able to speak this "inherent tension," philosophy has disavowed it. Caught in the fetters of academic knowledge, its wings clipped by feminist and postmodern accusations of transcendental universality, the philosophical subject has had its complexity—indeed, "its innermost core" (2)—buried. In brief, psychoanalysis is the voice of philosophy. It can unearth philosophy's "invisible truth" (29).

This insight is corroborated by Mladen Dolar's "Cogito as the Subject of the Unconscious," which examines the two Lacanian readings of the cogito, the standard account of *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, and the other, less known, account of "La Logique du Phantasme" (The Logic of Fantasy). In the first, cogito is founded on the primary repression of being: *cogito ergo sum* chooses "thought over being" (19). The subject has disappeared as being and the signs of this disappearance have been transferred to the Other. Modifying Descartes (for whom God remains the ultimate guarantor of knowledge), Lacan bars the Other, making the Other's desire inscrutable. Thus, if the disappearance of being sends the subject in search of an object inside him/her that might be on a level with the Other's desire, this search resolves in alienation in the signifier, the stand-in for something inaccessible that the Other lacks. In the second reading, Lacan rejects the dialectics of desire. Having inverted Descartes's terms (*sum, ergo cogito*), he posits a primary alienation. This alienation *before* the alienation in the signifier (and the intervention of the unconscious) rejects the Other because it covers the foundation of signification in being.

Dolar's point is that Lacan's return to Descartes reverses the succession of the two phases of the subject. In the phase of primary alienation there is "the espousal of an imaginary being (false being) of an 'I' sustained by the grammar of the drives" (35). Having rejected thought, this false "I" still experiences itself as the subject of thought. Clearly, the revised succession is instrumental to Lacan's theorization of a subjective position before enunciation. The pre-enunciative position—as this position might be termed—testifies to the non-transcendental nature of the subject as it has everything to do with a "stain of sum" prior to enunciation. Without neglecting the extremely engaging trio of essays on the critics of cogito (Robert Pfaller on Althusser, Marc de Kessel on Bataille, and Zizek on cognitive sciences' dismissal of the philosophical subject), Dolar's piece remains crucial to the book's thesis. At a time when the philosophical subject is under all sorts of attacks, psychoanalysis makes visible "the traces of [its] traumatic passage" (259) from the abyss of self-withdrawal (formerly misunderstood as Descartes's spectral vanishing point) to the open of rationality.

Yet, the book's return to the Lacanian two-step cogito may not be as unorthodox as the introduction assumes. Certainly, the contemporary "liberating proliferation of the multiple forms of subjectivity—feminine, gay, ethnic . . ." (6) issues from a rejection of Descartes. One need only recall Adriana Cavarero's feminist critique of "the monstrosity of the universal subject simultaneously male and neuter" (1987, 47). However, feminism was not the only censor of the universal subject. As Kristeva noted, linguistics played its part. With its democratic wish to make everyone begin in language, linguistics risked equating the psychic life of the subject with his/her social positioning. In the final analysis, both Zizek's anthology and the contemporary array of historicized multiple identities harbor the same dream of theorizing a pre-enunciative position. And rightly so, for the "stain of sum" prior to enunciation, which makes it difficult to close the gap between power and the psyche, is the real hope if, in the words of Michel Foucault, we want to become what we could be.

Perhaps because of this shared dream, the book, framed as a return to a more "classic," pre-feminist cogito, ends up being haunted by feminism. For example, Renata Salecl's "The Silence of Feminine *Jouissance*" unfailingly echoes Luce Irigaray's classic "When Our Lips Speak Together." *Jouissance's* extra-linguistic, non-symbolic ambience in Salecl's article builds on the non-identificatory *indifference* on the side of being, which characterizes the feminine subjective position (the pre-enunciative position in Lacan) in Irigaray's historic piece: "Why speak? you'll ask me. . . Aren't my hands, my eyes, my mouth, my lips, my body enough for you?" (1985, 214). Similarly, Zizek's remarks on sexual difference restore a certain philosophical glitter to

Irigarayan feminism: "A woman is much less dependent on her partner, since her ultimate partner is not the other human being, her object of desire (as in man), but the gap itself, the distance from the partner in which is located the *jouissance feminine*" (88-89). Even Irigaray's notion of mimicry is brought to new Hegelian heights in a reading of Ayn Rand's novel *The Fountainhead*, where the secondariness of ultra-macho figures elevates itself into the spirit of a "feminine subject liberated from the deadlocks of hysteria" (108). In Zizek's hands, feminist sexual difference turns out to have been an ontological attribute of the subject all along. The problem is that Zizek's psychoanalysis, eager to speak philosophy's innermost kernel, may disavow its own theoretical hybridity.

Tobin Siebers shows little sympathy for "philosophical exercises in the Continental tradition" (94-95). In his book, Zizek and Lacan are people with a "Midas touch" he would not want to have. They turn stories inside out; they are the practitioners of "the modern sublime," an "ob-scene" mode of thinking "less concerned with meaning than with desire" (99). Contrary to the classic sublime, where the subject experiences a self-awareness before a power far greater than his/her own, the modern sublime is in flight from the here and now and, consequently, from the labor of building communities. A similar verdict is issued against deconstructive theorists. They too are the storytellers of a "tyrannical and incomprehensible will" not even they can understand (112). Deconstruction, concludes Siebers, is "a nightmare" (94), its language-centered practice "revolting to a wider audience of practical readers" (85).

Obviously, Siebers is not happy with European thought's flight from the political. But his discontent betrays a more local argument with multiculturalism, which he holds responsible for the disintegration of race in the emergent concern with ethics. Undoubtedly, multiculturalism's inclusive spirit has redefined ethics. Most of us now think that ethics is "about including the excluded at all costs." But for Siebers, the multicultural ideal of a constellation of discrete cultures bordering on one another is only apparently interested in this redefinition. A consequence of the anthropological transformation of politics after the defeat of the civil rights movement, multiculturalism uses ethics to suppress the relevance of politics, displacing political action with cosmopolitanism. Like the civil rights movement, multiculturalism raises the issue of American identity: "It asks who is to be let into the American community" (63). Unlike the civil rights movement, multiculturalism does not want an answer. Indeed, its ethical zeal makes legislating the inclusion or exclusion of differences not only impossible but also ethically offensive (64). Who is to say which differences are good and which are bad? Think of the paradox of multiculturalism through the anecdote of the girl who, upon

being shown the picture of a Roman stadium where lions eat Christians, cried when she spotted a lion without his Christian (64). “Is it fair that he doesn’t have a Christian? How do we ease his suffering? How are we to right his wrong?” (64).

These are all legitimate questions if we accept spectacle as the substance of ethics. But it could be argued that an ethical society does not need to throw lions and Christians together for a gaze. From the vantage point of Zupancic’s Lacanian discussion of Kant—a philosopher Siebers appreciates in his engaging last chapter “Politics and Peace”—it becomes clear that Siebers’s argument with multiculturalism is an argument with the force of a formal law. First, multiculturalism says that everyone is a victim. Then, it elevates victims to heroes and asks everyone to feel for the victim the same “respect” Kant attributed to the law. As Zupancic explains, Kant’s moral imperative is on the side of the superego, fixed on the spectacle of a subject submitted precisely through his/her awesome capacity for submission. What Siebers dislikes about multiculturalism, then, is what Lacanian theory critiques in Kant. Like the Kantian imperative, multiculturalism’s respect for the victim has a Sadean potential: it aspires above all to formalize the awesome power to feel a law, to be subjected by a law—the victim’s in this case. This is why, arguing for a continuity between Geertz’s moral appreciation of differences and Rorty’s enlightened ethnocentric anti-ethnocentrism, Siebers complains that the idea of a multicultural solidarity remains “aesthetic”: it “frames a spectacle or object to be appreciated in itself” (69).

Even though he repeatedly argues for a return to the political, Siebers shares the restless spirit of postmodernism, which he defines as “utopian philosophy” bewildered about the possibility of thinking beyond the here and now (“What Postmodernism Wants”). Put in another way, postmodernism cannot accept easy solutions and easy answers. What else, in fact, is the invocation of the political—with the attendant comforting concepts like the practical, the here and now—if not a way of stopping the flow of the impossible (because unanswerable) questions dared by contemporary thought? Exemplary is Siebers’s treatment of “symbolic violence.” First, Siebers traces multiculturalism’s revulsion for symbolic violence to its anthropological roots. The ethnographer’s encounter of the familiar “we” and the exotic “they” has taught us that “desiring to be recognized and not being recognized is a form of symbolic violence. Indifference is a crime against the Other’s subjectivity. Shaking hands shakes the foundations of the self” (75). Then, having cogently summed up the whole question of contemporary subjectivity (Nancy 1991, 28) as if it were anthropology’s heritage, he concludes that “[t]his position has no political viability, and it is ethically inco-

herent" (75). At this point, the appeal to the political sounds like a dismissal of the questions posed by philosophy as irrelevant to practice.

Yet, Siebers's raucous restlessness becomes endearing once it reveals a mourning for the critic's lost vocation to heal cultural splits. Clearly, the essay on J. Hillis Miller ("Reading for Character"), a critic divided between his loyalty to the ethical law of deconstructive undecidability and a yearning for "really" reading, alludes to the state of American academia. The American critic comes across as a little trapped, a little besieged, perhaps even a little censored, "an enigmatic construction" with "resources that are and are not permitted to it" (77). One of the prerogatives the critic has lost—and that Siebers forcefully reclaims—is the making of community. Despite the cosmopolitan definition of character as "a place of otherness," literature for Siebers retains an almost eucharistic aim: it must produce a common "we." In Siebers's view, this aim "provides the only truly satisfying closure for human beings in both narrative and life" (94). Would this closure be so satisfying when the "we" is a formal "we", a fetishized subject passing as the subject, a forced communion passing as a political community?

Zizek's anthology and Siebers's essays take up two familiar contemporary issues: the crisis of philosophy and the loss of politics. In doing so, they argue at each other but, together, make for a good read on the current state of the subject. This is still beating against the old pane of dialectics. Call it master/slave, call it lions-and-Christians, it matters little. The scene is the same: a closed space the moth is dying to escape.

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