The Diminished Subject:

An Exploration into the *Aporia* of the Condition of the Possibility of Change as Represented in Twentieth Century Philosophy and Contemporary Literature

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This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Murdoch University, 2007.
Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

Signed: ______________________

Geoffrey David Bishop
Abstract

This thesis acts as an exploration of the notion of an *a priori* *aporia* of the always already diminished subject as opposed to an ideal self-present individual, and explores the efforts of a selection of twentieth century continental philosophy to address the crises of scepticism and metaphysics that beset this tradition and its search for the ‘truth’ of being. I will argue that my atemporal philosophical teleology proves in fact that any attempt to determine the finitude of subjectivity represents an ineluctable desire for metaphysical comfort that can, at times, verge on totalitarianism. Furthermore, the divergent temporal *loci* of these theorists — and their particular attempts to address these recurrent crises — necessarily calls into question the popular perception of a temporally specific ‘postmodern condition’ afflicting the contemporary subject.

Given the repeated failure of philosophical discourse to provide the subject with its *raison d’être*, a focus on the usefulness of literature in this regard becomes apparent within my theoretical schema, leading to a discussion of several controversial contemporary novels that parallel my proposition of the diminished subject, and refute negative perceptions of them as postmodern and valueless due to an apparent nihilistic ‘anything goes’ attitude. However, rather than resorting to naïve utopianism regarding the positive uses of literature, I argue that these texts reiterate the key theoretical propositions in this thesis with an awareness of the discursive nature of the subject and the *a priori* condition of the possibility of change which inevitably undermine transcendence. It is my proposition that these texts can be read as fictionalised expressions of the cathartic possibilities of literature, and an innate desire in all subjects for the metaphysics of comfort when faced with the meaninglessness of existence, something exacerbated by the recurrent failure of philosophical and religious discourses to counter the *aporia* of an always already absent self-presence of subjectivity.
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Introduction

By way of a brief ‘introduction’ to this thesis on the ‘diminished subject’ and contemporary literature, I will begin with a discussion regarding structure. Yet despite the philosophical nature of this text, I am not referring to the obvious Structuralist concerns of Claude Lévi-Strauss — the proto-post-structuralist musings of Roland Barthes — the Heideggerian discourse of ‘destruction’ — a widely disseminated misunderstanding of Derridean deconstruction — nor the plethora of anti-structuralist, anarchic, ‘free-play’ theories — both positive and negative — of ‘postmodernism.’ By contrast, and despite repeated attempts to achieve a concrete understanding or transcendence of subjectivity through the study of the minutiae of existence, or certain rabid anti-metaphysical responses to these deterministic investigations into the intimate aspects of our subjectivity, I am referring to the more mundane, but no less important, structures of the everyday that help us formulate our daily lives, our narratives of self, and which determine certain more formal discourses, such as thesis writing.

Due to what I shall refer to as the ‘metaphysics of submission’ it is necessary that I structure this thesis in a certain predetermined manner, bearing in mind font sizes, margin widths, minimum and maximum lengths, and various other dictates of formatting. What escapes such determinism, to one’s great fortune and potential peril, are the ideas and postulations therein and — if you have one — the conclusion. However, what is determined is that one structure one’s thesis in a certain way, with an introduction, or preface— outlining the content of the thesis but not ‘giving the game away’ too soon — with several lengthy chapters that elucidate one’s argument and build towards a climax — and a conclusion or denouement that reiterates, summarises, and gives clarity to one’s argument, while tantalisingly hinting at further areas of research. What is advisable though — despite the possibility that the theoretical content of any
given thesis may explore the potential limits of the defamiliarisation of discursive structures, through the appropriation of the anti-metaphysical theories of post-structuralism or deconstruction — is that these structures be adhered to.

Bearing in mind this problematic, it is indeed ironic that given the focus of this thesis into the possibility of a diminished contemporary subject — as opposed to the metaphysically self-present individual of traditional religious and philosophical discourses — that these determining structures should play such an overt role. However, rather than viewing the imposition of these structural dictates as a hindrance, I have appropriated this necessary, and unavoidable, metaphysical need for order to emphasise and amplify my proposition that the diminished subject is an a priori aspect of being, and not the retrograde diminishing of a previously obtainable metaphysical ideal self. Therefore, I use a deliberate structure of repetition and recurrence, whereby various crises of philosophy and subjectivity are reiterated in each chapter and sub-section, building a rhythm that reaches a theoretical coda of sorts in the final chapter. Apart from the obvious aim of emphasising my theoretical propositions, this structure not only allows for any individual section to be read as a micro-level exemplar of the entire text, it also develops a certain familiarity with my arguments and neologisms, which I extrapolate and consolidate in my final chapter.

As a consolation to myself, and given my patent mistrust of deterministic and totalitarian discourses, I have taken a certain liberty with this particular structure. While the first three chapters make up the bulk of my theoretical propositions, there exists a problem for those in need of the metaphysical comfort of a chronological ‘correct’ teleology of my subjective reading of twentieth century continental thought. Rather than exploring the possible theoretical precedents of the diminished subject in temporal order — and given the historical concurrence of certain theorists and unavoidable cross-fertilisation of ideas — I instead chose to follow the subtext of the other major premise
of this thesis — the possibility of positive alternative explorations of subjectivity in literature — and create a diachronous teleology that investigates an increased focus on the literary, rather than reinforcing any philosophical timeline. Thus, it becomes apparent why my theoretical ‘genealogy’ begins with Sigmund Freud and ends with Albert Camus rather than commencing, as one might expect, with the writing of Friedrich Nietzsche and ending with the recently deceased Jacques Derrida.

Despite my attempt to structure this thesis in an anti-metaphysical manner, there remain certain necessary groupings of theoretical thematics in each of the first three chapters. This begins with Chapter 1: The Unconscious, the Symbolic & the Semiotic — Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva, wherein I focus on the increased conflation of the discussion of subjectivity and the literary which, despite proposing a teleology of psychoanalytic theory, progressively becomes less deterministic. In Chapter 2: Phenomenology, Deconstruction and the Diminished Subject — Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida, I explore the manner in which the development of Husserlian phenomenology mutated firstly into the ‘proto-deconstruction’ of Heideggerian ‘destruction,’ and then the widely appropriated and much maligned theories of Derridean deconstruction, all of which undermine the primacy of the self-present individual by acknowledging the ineluctable relationship between subject and language. While finally in Chapter 3: Nihilism, Existentialism, Absurdism and the Diminished Subject — Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, I perform a ‘literary turn’ of sorts, whereby my theoretical focus on literature and subjectivity reaches its peak with the somewhat vitriolic aphorisms of Nietzsche’s proto-existentialism, the rigorous existential theories and inconsistent fiction of Sartre, and the widely revered fiction of the theoretical ‘outsider’ Camus.

Having reached a zenith of sorts with the philosophical possibilities of literature with Camus, I then shift my attention to a contemporary discussion of the diminished
subject in relation to so-called ‘postmodernism’ and arguments pertaining to a supposed lack of content and value in the literature of this anti-theoretical movement — something that roughly divides this thesis into two halves. In Chapter 4: The Diminished Subject, Contemporary Theory and Literature — The Postmodern Condition and Generation X, I discuss a plethora of discourses — both positive and negative — with a view to the subject of the ‘postmodern condition’ as a diminished shadow of the former self-present ‘modern’ individual, and of the apparent nihilism and apathy of an entire generation and its cultural output, before carrying out a close reading of Bret Easton Ellis’ Less Than Zero — a text widely regarded as exemplifying these criticisms. Then in Chapter 5: The Prescient Text — Subjectivity, Literature and Philosophy in Trainspotting, Empire of the Senseless, Cocaine Nights and American Psycho, I discuss the philosophical implications of fictionalised expressions of the diminished subject, while referring to, and reiterating, the key themes and concepts discussed in previous chapters. While finally, in Chapter 6: The Diminished Subject, The Metaphysics of Comfort, The Narrative of Self and Michel Foucault, I discuss the philosophical life and works of Michel Foucault as a form of summary par excellence of my repeated theoretical proposition of the diminished subject and the impact of the condition of the possibility of change.
Chapter 1
The Unconscious, the Symbolic & the Semiotic —
Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva

1.1.a. Sigmund Freud — From Individual to Subject

To begin this theoretical investigation into the a priori diminished subject the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud makes an ideal starting point, for not only did Freud question the metaphysical tradition of philosophy, his innovative investigations into the human mind provided the catalyst for a shift away from the dominant perspective of self-present consciousness, to one that undermined the traditional primacy of the Cartesian cogito. In The Subject of Semiotics, Kaja Silverman discusses the implications of the transition from a traditional notion of the self-present individual to a predominant postmodern view of the fragmented subject, indicating that within Freudian psychoanalysis there occurred a movement away from the stable concept of metaphysical consciousness toward a view of a divided unconscious, arguing that: “[t]ogether the terms ‘individual’ and ‘man’ posit an entity that is autonomous and stable. ‘Man’ presupposes a human essence that remains untouched by historical or cultural circumstances — what the Renaissance was fond of calling ‘reason,’ but which in the twentieth century generally goes by the name ‘consciousness’” (1983:126).

Traditionally then, consciousness was seen as the irrefutable locus of individuality and self-presence that existed independent of external influences, yet Freud’s theoretical shift from consciousness to the unconscious proposed that the individual was subject to cultural and discursive influences, a position radically removed from traditional religious philosophy. The primacy of consciousness in traditional metaphysical philosophy is made clear by French philosopher René Descartes, and his famous proclamation ‘cogito ergo sum’ — or ‘I think therefore I am.’ In his ‘Introduction’ to
Descartes’ *Discourse on Method*, F.E. Sutcliffe explains that with the primacy of consciousness there occurs:

[A] clear and distinct conception of the fact that he exists; he can therefore believe that whatever else he perceives with the same clarity and distinction is equally true. Moreover, he knows himself only as a thinking being, he is therefore assured that the soul and the body are entirely distinct. Since he has been able to understand his own being and essence without yet knowing anything about the world outside him, it follows that his self — or soul — is completely independent of the outside world, mind is distinct and superior to matter (1972:19).

In other words, for Descartes consciousness exists independent of external cultural discourses making it purely self-present, something Silverman expands upon when indicating that: “Descartes’s ‘I’ assumes itself to be fully conscious […] and hence fully self-knowable. It is not only autonomous but coherent; the concept of another psychic territory, in contradiction to consciousness, is unimaginable” (1983:128). For Descartes therefore, nothing can impinge on the primacy of the *cogito* for the presence of consciousness in the newly born precludes the possibility of any prior interference from culture. Although Descartes was predominantly interested in consciousness as a manifestation of perfection that proved the existence of God, his position was widely popular given its inherent humanism. However, with Freud’s focus on the unconscious there occurred a shift from this unquestioned self-present individual to that of the divided subject. Furthermore, he broke with the tradition of the *cogito* further still by implicating the body in the development of consciousness and the discursive influences of language and culture on subjectivity, a position far removed from that of metaphysical philosophy. As such, what follows is an outline of Freud’s key theories that illustrate this change, and which posit the influence of external registers such as culture, language and corporeality in this process. Therefore, I shall begin by discussing Freud’s theory of the advent of infantile sexuality which not only divided the subject in its own right, but created rifts within his theory of the preconscious unconscious, and his later concepts of the id, ego and super-ego.
1.1.b. The Sexually Divided Subject

The first of Freud’s theoretical propositions that supports the notion of a diminished subjectivity is the Oedipus complex, something that takes its lead from Sophocles’ *King Oedipus*, and sets about explaining the development of infantile sexuality whereby the incest taboo directs the individual towards acceptable sexual behaviour. Freud argued that following its successful progression through the oral and anal stages, a child arrives at the genital stage giving rise to the Oedipus complex, which manifests itself as the first love-object and a longing in the child for the opposite gender parent, and results in the equivalent parent becoming a threat to the fulfilment of this taboo, and for it to wish for the death of this apparent rival. Freud highlights this process in *The Interpretation of Dreams* stating that:

> It is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father. Our dreams convince us that this is so. King Oedipus […] merely shows us the fulfilment of our own childhood wishes. But, more fortunate than he, we have meanwhile succeeded, in so far as we have not become psychoneurotics, in detaching our sexual impulses from our mothers and in forgetting our jealousy of our fathers (1983:364).

Despite the obvious cultural implications for the development of sexuality here, Freud suggests that the individual must repress this taboo desire for the love of one parent and the death of the other, in order to become a stable and socially acceptable sexual being. He believes that this was achieved through the twin processes of a fear of castration and the repression of the Oedipus complex, both of which begin the division of the subject and facilitate the interpellation of culturally determined gender roles. Following rebuttals for playing with his genitals, the boy’s fear of castration, and the resigned acceptance of castration by the girl, are instrumental in the suppression of the Oedipus complex and the division of the subject into gender roles. For Freud the boy is faced with two choices as a result of his inappropriate desire for his mother — although Freud suggests that there is a third that leads to homosexuality — he can attempt to have
intercourse with her, or resign himself to the displacement of his wish for the love of his mother and to sublimate another love-object, such as the father. However, as he discusses in ‘The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex,’ these choices are extremely problematic given that they both involve the loss of the penis with: “the masculine one as a resulting punishment and the feminine one as a precondition. If the satisfaction of love in the field of the Oedipus complex is to cost the child his penis, a conflict is bound to arise between the narcissistic interest in that part of his body and the libidinal cathexis of his parental objects” (176). Thus, the child’s narcissistic desire for his penis leads to the sublimation of the Oedipus complex and is instrumental in the development of the ego as an alternative love-object to both mother and father in the form of self-love, leading to the latency period and the successful development of male sexuality. However, the realisation of this threat, and the repression of the Oedipus complex, become manifest only when the young boy first views female genitalia, with the missing penis the assumed result of castration.

Freud believes that the boy’s desire to retain his genitals, and the recognition of the girl as castrated, allows the male child to repress his prohibited desires, explaining this process thus: “The observation which finally breaks down his unbelief is the sight of the female genitals. Sooner or later the child, who is so proud of his possession of a penis, has a view of the genital region of a little girl, and cannot help being convinced of the absence of a penis in a creature that is so like himself. With this, the loss of his own penis becomes imaginable, and the threat of castration takes its desired effect” (175-76). He suggests that this fear of castration, and the switching of love-objects, has a doubly dividing effect, as an originary and inherent bisexuality then needs to be overcome and is only achieved with the repression of the Oedipus complex and the onset of the ego as love-object. In addition, the development of the child’s behaviour through the fulfilment of pleasurable desire is controlled by the unpleasure principle — later redeveloped by
Freud as the pleasure principle — that prevents the individual acting on wishes and desires that are deemed taboo. Thus, the Oedipal desire for the taboo, and the unpleasurable fear of castration is repressed, and the possibility of a metaphorical division of the subject is removed.

The recognition in the boy of the girl’s absent penis, and *vice versa*, begins the differentiation between the sexes and establishes culturally specific gender roles. The possibility of castration finds the boy gladly accepting his gender role and results in the repression of his desire for his mother and the death of the father, thus allowing him to achieve his masculine status. The girl’s story is quite different and has resulted in feminist criticism of Freud’s perspective of the female as lacking and inferior, given that it creates an oppressive division between the sexes and diminishes female influence in society, as can be seen when Freud states that:

The little girl’s clitoris behaves just like a penis to begin with; but, when she makes a comparison with a playfellow of the other sex she perceives that she has ‘come off badly’ and she feels this as a wrong done to her and as grounds for inferiority. For a while she consoles herself with the expectation that later on, when she grows older, she will acquire just as big an appendage as the boy’s. Here the masculinity complex of women branches off. A female child, however, does not understand her lack of a penis as being a sex character; she explains it by assuming that at some earlier date she had possessed an equally large organ and lost it in castration […] the essential difference thus comes about that the girl accepts castration as an accomplished fact (178).

For Freud then, the threat of castration is paramount in the repression of the Oedipus complex in the boy, while the girl is under the impression that she has suffered an actual castration and views herself as inferior to the male — and *a priori* lacking — leading her to desire the father, and to sublimate the loss of her own penis onto his and to bear him a child. He points out that: “Her Oedipus complex culminates in a desire, which is long retained, to receive a baby from her father as a gift — to bear him a child […] The two wishes — to possess a penis and child — remain strongly cathected in the unconscious and help prepare the female creature for her later sexual role” (179). Thus, the repression of the Oedipus complex can be seen to create a clear stratification of
gender roles whereby the position of female subject — or ‘creature’ — is greatly diminished in comparison to the male.

1.1.c. The Diminished Subject and the Early Topography

Although I have merely touched on the manner in which the Oedipus complex divides the male and female subject through the imposition of discursive gender roles, it also acts as the main source for Freud’s investigations into the unconscious of those suffering from what he termed ‘psychoneuroses.’ He began investigating the psychological and pathological problems of individuals under hypnosis, but soon developed a process whereby dreams became his focus of attention, believing that the symptoms of those suffering from neuroses were caused by the incomplete repression of unfulfilled desires that were usually sexually taboo in nature, and arose in early infancy. He suggested that this process of repression was carried out by the preconscious at the behest of the pleasure principle in order to prevent the individual suffering any unpleasure resulting from inappropriate wish fulfilment — such as castration with the Oedipus complex. In Freud’s first theoretical topography he proposed a need for the conscious to be shielded from unpleasurable experiences, something achieved by an interaction between what he termed the preconscious and the unconscious. He believed that the clearest manifestation of the unconscious was in dreams, and that in dream-work there was affected a process of condensation and displacement. It was here that the unpleasurable aspects of wish-fulfilment were redirected onto alternative and innocent moments — generally based on the previous day’s experiences — and thereby displaced and disguised as dream-thoughts to protect the individual, and provide them with a sound sleep. Here we see a departure from Descartes’ self-present individual, as the preconscious represses prohibited wishes of the unconscious thus preventing them from becoming conscious and present, and those which do so are censored and filtered by the preconscious, thus metaphysically dividing the subject.
For Freud then, it was in the dreams of those suffering from neuroses that this process could best be disclosed allowing the analyst an insight into the workings of the unconscious mind of the analysand. However, as Freud points out in *The Interpretation of Dreams*: “what is suppressed, continues to exist in normal people as well as abnormal, and remains capable of psychical functioning. Dreams themselves are among the manifestations of this suppressed material” (1983:768). Here Freud draws a distinction between those who have repressed their prohibited desires and those who have not, and for whom the taboo manifests itself in dream-thoughts and — in some cases — physical symptoms. It was his belief that these psychoneurotic disorders could be revealed in therapy thus enabling the individual to function in normal society, yet this process legitimates certain socially acceptable expressions of subjectivity, and effectively diminishes those who fall outside its deterministic parameters.

Although Freud was primarily interested in the well being of those suffering from neuroses — for he was essentially a humanist — he still believed that with the analysis of dreams the complete workings of the human mind could be uncovered, famously explaining that: “The interpretation of dreams is the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind” (769). He goes on to state that: “By analysing dreams we can take a step forward in our understanding of the composition of that most marvellous of all instruments. Only a small step, no doubt; but a beginning” (769). Freud believed that dreams and pathologies were entrances into the unconscious workings of the mind, and that a greater understanding of these processes, achieved through psychoanalysis, would gradually reveal its secrets resulting in clearer perspectives of neuroses and subjectivity in general.

While Freud can be seen to diminish the metaphysical individual with his division of the human mind into the conscious, preconscious and unconscious, he was also ‘guilty’ of establishing his own metaphysical propositions. When discussing sexual
neuroses, Freud explains that: “The theory of the psychoneuroses asserts as an indisputable and invariable fact that only sexual wishful impulses from infancy, which have undergone repression […] during the developmental period of childhood, are capable of being revived during later developmental periods […] and are thus able to furnish the motive force for the formation of psychoneurotic symptoms of every kind” (766). That is, for Freud the inadequate repression of the early oral, anal, genital phases and the Oedipus complex, invariably leads to neuroses, hysterical behaviour and sexual aberrations. However, despite believing that he could unlock the workings of the mind through the analysis of neuroses, he expressed reservations about this process arguing that: “It is not now a question of whether I have formed an approximately correct opinion of the psychological factors with which we are concerned, or whether, which is quite possible in such difficult matter, my picture of them is distorted and incomplete” (767). Thus, Freud himself appears divided, for although he redefines the subject in terms of the unconscious and the effects of the Oedipus complex, he also diminishes the primacy of the metaphysical subject, and while he attempts to pinpoint neurotic behaviour in a deterministic manner on one hand, he fuels doubts about the validity of his research on the other. Therefore, Freud constantly redeveloped his theoretical premises according to new insights, pointing out that: “we must always be prepared to drop our conceptual scaffolding if we feel that we are in a position to replace it by something that approximates more closely to the unknown reality” (770). This not only brings into question the possibility of a complete understanding of the unconscious, but also acts as a theoretical manifestation of the inherently diminished subject.

1.1.d. The Divided Subject of the Mature Topography

Having undermined the traditional notion of the primacy of the self-present *cogito* in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud continued his division of the unconscious in his later work, and it is to ‘The Id and the Ego’ and the manner in which his ‘mature
topography’ continues to diminished the subject that I shall now turn to. Reworking his earlier propositions Freud posited that gaps existed in the relationship between the preconscious and the unconscious and set about redefining these mental processes. To account for the passage of acceptable thoughts and memories from the conscious to the unconscious — when the unconscious was seen solely as a repressing agent — Freud renamed the unconscious the id, and divided the preconscious between the ego and super-ego. The ego being primarily a bodily process involved with the external world and the id the purely internal, while the super-ego acts as a facilitator between the two, thus dividing Freud’s conceptual apparatus even further.

Following the repression of the Oedipus complex and the sublimation of the parent as love-object, Freud believed there was a void in the wish fulfilment of the unconscious that needed to be supplanted by the ego. Silverman explains the difference between the id and the unconscious stating that: “it lacks the latter’s signifying capacities, seeing to be little more than an area of instinctual anarchy. Freud associates it with the passions, and he attributes to it qualities like unruliness and lack of control. The id always obeys the dictates of the pleasure principle, no matter what the consequences” (1983:133). That is, the ego develops with the repression of the Oedipus complex, keeping the primordial desires of the id in check by setting itself up as the love-object thus replacing the original parental object-choice — that which is deemed taboo — without recourse to unpleasure. Freud explains this process in ‘The Id and the Ego’ stating that: “it may be said that this transformation of an erotic object-choice into an alteration of the ego is also a method by which the ego can obtain control over the id and deepen its relation with it [...] When the ego assumes the feature of the object, it is forcing itself, so to speak, upon the id as a love-object and is trying to make good the id’s loss by saying: ‘Look, you can love me too — I am so like the object’” (1978:30). We can see that there occurs a process of introjection whereby the ego facilitates the
transformation of the desire for inaccessible love-objects through reason and common sense — referred to as the ‘reality principle’ — setting itself up as an alternative love-object keeping the pleasure principle in check. This process creates a view of subjectivity as divided between the primordial desires of the pleasure principle that acts on the id, and the reason and control of the reality principle, as executed by the ego.

However, there exists another division and arena of conflict in Freud’s mature topography in the relationship between the ego and the super-ego, or ego-ideal. He states that the super-ego develops following the repression of the Oedipus complex and acts as a link between the external concerns of the ego and the internal processes of the id, suggesting that it does so primarily to keep the Oedipus complex repressed and to establish an ideal ego, which must at once reinforce its masculine role, and suppress the desire for the mother. He argues that: “The super-ego is […] not simply a residue of the earliest object-choices of the id; it also represents an energetic reaction-formation against these choices. Its relation to the ego is not exhausted by the precept: ‘You ought to be like this (like your father).’ It also compromises the prohibition: ‘You may not be like this (like your father) — that is, you may not do all he does; some things are his prerogative.’ This double aspect of the ego ideal derives from the fact that the ego ideal had the task of repressing the Oedipus complex” (34). Not only does the super-ego repress the ego by dictating the manner in which it may, or may not, act on the desires of the id, Freud suggests it also acts as the heir to the Oedipus complex. That is, it allows identification with, but not the displacement of the father by the ego, and assumes that disciplinary role for itself, indicating that the super-ego not only represses the Oedipus complex, it also acts as a surrogate to the paternal discipline of the father and a distinction between it and the ego. Thus, the imposition of the ego-ideal establishes a distinction between the self of the ego, and the other that is the father.\(^8\)
1.1.e. The Culturally and Literally Divided Subject

Freud’s fascination with the inner workings of the mind stemmed from his interest in psychoneurotic behaviour and, in most cases, he viewed these neuroses as the result of the incomplete repression of the Oedipus complex by the unconscious in his early work, and by the super-ego in his later formulations. For Freud, these neurotic manifestations were expressions of prohibited wish fulfilment and generally taboo in nature, believing that those suffering from these symptoms needed to undergo dream therapy and psychoanalysis in order to successfully achieve acceptable sexual and social behaviour. Thus, Freud’s attitude towards the development of the sexual subject is inherently deterministic, given that those exhibiting counter-discursive behaviour are automatically ‘othered’ for their own good, and for that of the wider community.

We find him expressing this view in ‘The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex,’ wherein he argues that: “[a]lthough the majority of human beings go through the Oedipus complex as an individual experience, it is nevertheless a phenomenon which is determined and laid down by hereditary and which is bound to pass away according to programme when the next preordained phase of development sets in” (1978:174). In other words, the phases of sexual development and the outcome of the repression of the Oedipus complex — whereby subjects interpellate their gender roles — are viewed as metaphysical. Those individuals who fail to achieve this accepted standard — such as neurotics, hysterics, schizophrenics, homosexuals, bisexuals and even epileptics — form a problematic minority that must be cured by psychoanalysis. This metaphysical perspective of sexual development and general behaviour not only prioritises dominant cultural gender roles, it highlights the personal moralistic position of the theorist himself. Silverman comments on the cultural determination of sexuality explaining that: “[I]n Three Essays on Sexuality oral and anal sexuality are designated as ‘pre-genital,’ as if to suggest that they are preliminary stages in a larger narrative. Even the adult
sexual encounter resembles a road whose destination is all-important — since the logical culmination of such an act is procreation, excessive lingering (i.e. foreplay) along the way is to be discouraged” (1983:136). Thus, Freud’s perspective of psychoneurotic sexual behaviour is not only discursive in nature — reflecting the dominant cultural and moralistic dictates of his time — it further diminishes and divides the self-present subject. Therefore, acceptable gender roles are socially derived rather than ‘preordained,’ while counter-discursive sexuality is dismissed as infantile, and those subjects exhibiting these ‘neuroses’ find themselves drastically othered.

Having highlighted the problems associated with Freud’s metaphysical perspective of the Oedipus complex as essentially discursive, it must be noted that he was quite aware of the influence of culture on his theories, explaining in ‘The Ego and the Id,’ that: “[t]he differentiation between ego and id must be attributed not only to primitive man but even to much smaller organisms, for it is the inevitable expression of the influence of the external world. The super-ego, according to our hypothesis, actually originated from the experiences that led to totemism” (1978:38). As such, there exists herein a contradiction, whereby Freud views the sexual development of the subject as preordained, while acknowledging the cultural and discursive origins of the Oedipus complex — the very cornerstone of his theories. If, as he suggests, the super-ego is developed from the Oedipus complex and is based on the taboo and totemism, then it follows that his perspective of the human mind is itself culturally determined and necessarily reliant on discursive practices and linguistic dictates, and therefore always already exposed to the condition of the possibility of change. This view also explains critical feminist readings of Freud’s perspective of pre-given and socially defined genders roles that isolate the sexually counter-discursive as an aberration on the basis of subjectively determined and temporally specific metaphysical concepts.
Despite these contradictions he took great interest in historical, mythological and literary texts in order to build his perspective of the Oedipus complex. Having based his theory on Sophocles’ story of *King Oedipus*, Freud carried out his own reading of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* as an Oedipal text, positing that Hamlet was suffering from a psychoneurotic disorder brought about by the murder of his father by Claudius, who subsequently married his mother Gertrude. Freud explains Hamlet’s initial inability to act on his findings, and his bellicose soliloquies thus: “Hamlet is able to do anything — except take vengeance on the man who did away with his father and took that father’s place with his mother, the man who shows him the repressed wishes of his own childhood realized. Thus the loathing which should drive him on to revenge is replaced in him as self-reproaches, by scruples of conscience, which remind him that he is literally no better than the sinner whom he is to punish” (1983:367). Therefore, the murder of his father allowed Hamlet to access his repressed Oedipal desire, and explains his treatment of the doomed Ophelia, as his mother regained her initial position of love-object as the result of his infantile regression.

This psychoanalytic reading of Hamlet, and the theorisation of the Oedipal narrative, indicates the influence literature played in Freud’s work and explains his repeated use of literary texts — including those of Goethe and Dostoyevsky and — to support his propositions. He explains his interest in mythology and literature in *The Interpretation of Dreams* stating that: “The obscure information which is brought to us by mythology and legend from the primaeval ages of human society gives an unpleasing picture of the father’s despotic power and of the ruthlessness with which he made use of it. Kronos devoured his children, just as the wild boar devours the sow’s litter; while Zeus emasculated his father” (1983:357). Despite the obvious biological imperative of the incest taboo, his theory of sexual development is based on discursive practices and cannot be viewed as *a priori* due to the arbitrary nature of language.
An example in which the Oedipus complex can be seen as discursive and non-deterministic — and one where the social and cultural milieu of the times enabled the perpetrator to justify his actions — can be seen with the Roman Emperor Caligula. In his seminal ficto-historical novel *I, Claudius*, Robert Graves gives another perspective of the Oedipus complex in action — and another Claudius! — as illustrated in the following excerpt wherein Caligula confesses his actions to his Uncle:

‘And what’s more, by the age of eight I had killed my father. Jove himself never did that. He merely banished the old fellow.’
I took this as raving on the same level, but asked in a matter-of-fact voice, ‘Why did you do that?’
‘He stood in my way. He tried to discipline me — me, a young God, imagine it! So I frightened him to death. I smuggled the dead things into his house at Antioch and hid them under loose tiles […] And I robbed him of his Hecate. Look, here she is! I always keep her under my pillow.’ He held up the green jasper charm.
My heart went as cold as ice when I recognized it. I said in a horrified voice: ‘You were the one then? …’
He nodded proudly and went rattling on: ‘Not only did I kill my natural father but I killed my father by adoption too — Tiberius, you know. And whereas Jupiter only lay with one sister of his, Juno, I have lain with all three of mine. Martina told me it was the right thing to do if I wanted to be like Jove’ (1987:334).

This literary expression of an historic event undermines the metaphysical certitude of the sexual development of the infant as put forth by Freud, and is made manifest as Caligula justifies killing his father and step-father, and eats his unborn child beget to his sister, with a literal belief that in so doing he will become a deity. That is, Caligula’s cultural background — and obvious position of power — enabled him to carry out these taboo acts, and having done so he pronounced himself a god becoming invulnerable to criticism due to the *a priori* acceptance of the Roman people of the validity of this explanation. This example clearly indicates that cultural taboos are discursive and subject to the condition of the possibility of change, and thus remain open to interpretation, for despite his assured beliefs Caligula’s extreme actions did bring about his down-fall and the rise to power of the more moderate Claudius.

Graves’ interpretation of Caligula’s actions suggests that the Oedipus complex is not simply a metaphysical process, but rather a manifestation of the dominant cultural
discourse prohibiting incest. Furthermore, Freud’s extrapolation of other psychoneurotic disorders — such as homosexuality — and his view of preordained gender roles can also be seen as discursive and therefore inherently questionable. Although Freud’s theoretical propositions were instrumental in marking a shift from the perspective of the primacy of the metaphysical individual of traditional philosophy, he can be accused of attempting to determine his own metaphysics of psychoanalysis. This at once diminishes and oppresses the subject with its deterministic view of gender roles and acceptable sexual behaviour, which despite being necessarily biological in nature, can at times be seen to limit and oppress alternative expressions of sexual subjectivity.

1.2.a. Jacques Lacan and the Subject of Language

Having explained the manner in which Freud’s theoretical focus on the unconscious constituted a shift from the traditional metaphysical self-present individual of Descartes’ cogito, I will now turn to the work of French theorist Jacques Lacan, focussing on his reworking of Freud’s ego-based psychoanalysis, and how this relates to the diminished subject. Before I begin my discussion of his oeuvre and how desire, lack and language constitute the Lacanian subject, I shall address the difficulties in defining a neat schematic of his ideas and how this relates to both his, and my, theoretical propositions. Lacan’s work can be divided into several key periods, the first of which was focussed on the concept of the ‘Imaginary,’ and the influence of the image on the development of the subject. In the second — following the influence of Ferdinand de Saussure — he became interested in the way the subject is constituted by language and the ‘Symbolic order.’ While in the third he attempted a formalised science of psychoanalysis using logic and mathematics, although for the purpose of this section I shall limit my discussion to the first and second of these periods. Yet, despite these metaphysical and teleological delineations, Lacan also referred to, and reworked, certain key theoretical concepts pertaining to an a priori diminished subject.
The great difficulty in mapping a temporally coherent teleology of Lacan’s few published works is that rather than standing individually they represent the collation of over 30 years of seminars — the bulk of which make up the seminal Ecrits — resulting in little comparison between his texts the expansive collected works of Freud. As Madan Sarup points out in his book *Jacques Lacan*, by acting as Lacan’s primary text Ecrits poses a problem because at the same time it deliberately avoids being:

[T]heoretically or epistemologically homogeneous [and is] extraordinarily difficult to read for many reasons. It is said that these ‘writings’ are a rebus. A rebus, like a dream, is a sort of picture puzzle, which looks like nonsense but, when separated into elements and interprets, makes sense. Lacan’s writings are a rebus because his style mimics the subject matter. He not only explicates the unconscious but strives to imitate it [...] Lacan believes that language speaks the subject, that the speaker is subjected to language rather than master of it (1992:80).

As such, with its non-linear and linguistic approach, Ecrits exemplifies Lacan’s fragmented writing style and imitates the primacy of language in the development of subjectivity. Sarup adds that Ecrits can be compared to Roland Barthes’ *scriptable* or ‘writerly’ text and that: “[t]he architecture of Ecrits is such that it is almost impossible to trace the development or the history of the concepts deployed: chronology is in effect abolished” (1992:81). Therefore Lacan, with his interest in Saussurian semiotics and the post-structuralist works of Barthes — and their respective interest in language — makes a notable departure from Freud, yet still diminishes the subject. This is not only evident with his theoretical approach but also in his writing style, for as Sarup points out in *Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*, Lacan’s interest in the subject, language, and his playful ficto-critical writing, indicates a more overt interest in the literary, arguing that his: “theory of language is such that he could not return to Freud: texts cannot have an unambiguous pristine meaning. In his view, analysts must relate directly with the unconscious and this means that they must be practitioners of the language of the unconscious — that of poetry, puns, internal rhymes” (1988:9). That is, Lacan not only shifted the focus of psychoanalysis from the ego to the unconscious, he posited the
importance of language in the development of the subject thus echoing the dominant structuralist theories of his day. It was his belief that the unconscious was like a language that needed to be viewed in linguistic terms, to such an extent that he wrote in a style that replicated his own theoretical practices.

Despite the absence of a neat teleology of Lacan’s work it is necessary that I construct an account of certain concepts in order to support my proposition of the diminished subject, and with this in mind I will turn to Kaja Silverman’s *The Subject of Semiotics* which usefully attempts such a chronology: “Lacan’s theory of the subject reads like a classic narrative — it begins with birth, and then moves in turn through the territorialization of the body, the mirror stage, access to language, and the Oedipus complex [...] each of the stages of this narrative is conceived in terms of some kind of self-loss or lack” (1983:150). Interestingly, Silverman’s description of the Lacanian subject as a classic narrative clearly runs counter to Sarup’s description of *Ecrits* as neither ‘theoretically or epistemologically homogeneous,’ thus highlighting again the difficulties faced with any discussion his work. Despite this, it is his interest in ‘lack,’ ‘loss’ and language in the development of the subject that I will use to continue this teleology into the *a priori* diminished subject and the importance of the literary.

1.2.b. Pre-Oedipal Territorialization & The Mirror Stage — The Pre-symbolic Subject

The dominant thematic throughout Lacan’s work is that of an inherent lack originating with the birth of the subject and, true to Lacan’s playful writing style, one could refer to this theory as Lac(k)anian. The jocose nature of his writing is made clear when he evokes the ‘myth of the lamella’ from Aristophanes’ story of the birth of desire in Plato’s *Symposium*, which refers to how an enraged Zeus divided the original androgynous human form in two: “just like a fruit which is to be dried and preserved, or like eggs which are cut with a hair” (1986:60). With this act Zeus supposedly initiated a desire in either sex for the other, thus instigating a lack, leading Lacan to evoke his
(in)famous egg joke. In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* he refers to this divided subject as “l’hommelette,” or human omelette (1986:197) — indicating either a scrambling of the subject, or perhaps the initial division of the fertilised human ovum — and yet again we find a myth acting as the originary premise of the diminished subject that undermines the notion of a temporally specific fragmented postmodern subject. With the child’s loss of its initial androgynous self and desire to return to that wholeness, the subject becomes irreconcilable divided and diminished, for when discussing Aristophanes’ story further Lacan states that: “To this mythical representation of the mystery of love, analytic experience substitutes the search by the subject, not of the sexual complement, but of the part of himself, lost forever” (205). As such, his view of a child’s birth is one based on an irrevocable loss that undermines the possibility of it attaining self-presence, thus instigating a desire for an unobtainable ideal, and initiating the child’s progress into the symbolic order. Furthermore, this split between the original whole and the divided subject results in a sexual desire for the Other, and acts as the catalyst for the child’s unquestioning acceptance of a socially discursive sexual identity.

Taking his lead from this myth, Lacan proposes that the lack associated with the birth of the male child is the origin of the desire for the ‘Other’ sex, as it seeks to regain its initial completeness through the sexual desire for the (m)Other, thus beginning its representation in the symbolic order. He expands on this point stating that: “The subject is born in so far as the signifier emerges in the field of the Other. But, by this very fact, this subject — which, was previously nothing if not a subject coming into being — solidifies into a signifier” (199). The separation of mother and child, coupled with its entrance into the sexual world, gives rise to the Oedipus complex, and begins its entrance into the ‘Imaginary’ and the ‘Symbolic’ orders as it becomes socially
determined. However, as Lacan locates this separation in the biologically ‘Real,’ or pre-symbolic order, it also predates the child’s entrance into language.

The next pre-symbolic division occurs after birth and is referred to as pre-Oedipal territorialization, a process whereby the child learns to differentiate its corporeal zones due to the attention paid to them by the mother, and thus begins its preparation for the sexual role it acquires upon entering the symbolic order. This partitioning of the body has the effect of curtailing the unbounded libidinal flows, and the search for pleasure from the various erotogenic areas of the body, such as the mouth, anus, penis and vagina. As Lacan explains in *Ecrits* these areas of the body become sites of contestation between pleasure and control:

For these objects, part- or not, but certainly signifying — the breast, excrement, the phallus — are no doubt won or lost by the subject. He is destroyed by them or he preserves them, but above all he *is* these objects, according to the place where they function in his fundamental phantasy. This mode of identification simply demonstrates the pathology of the slope down which the subject is pushed in a world where his needs are reduced to exchange values — this slope itself finding its radical possibility only in the mortification that the signifier imposes on his life in enumerating it (1999:251-2).

Despite the fact that the child is still in the pre-symbolic stage there begins a process of cultural interference whereby the mother checks the unbridled libidinal desires of the child, and its body is differentiated according to its ‘appropriate’ gender role. This immediately diminishes the subject in part due to the control exacted on the child’s unmediated search for pleasure, and the pre-ordained gender role instigated by the mother. Because the child has not yet begun to differentiate itself from its other — as seen in the Mirror Stage — the ‘erotogenic zones’ of pleasure are culturally designated and denied resulting in a lack that manifests itself as a desire for the Other or, what Lacan refers to as, ‘“objet petit autre’ or ‘object petit a’” (1986:103-4) — that missing aspect of their previously undifferentiated body.

The next division of the subject occurs when the child enters the Imaginary order, and is best expressed in his concept of the Mirror stage, when the infant begins to
differentiate between itself and the Other, while the Oedipus complex comes into play with the advent of the symbolic order. For Lacan, the Mirror stage also initiates the development of the ego, yet unlike Freud, he believes that the ego is created by misrecognition, or “*méconnaissance*” (1986:74), which stems from the recognition of a perfectly reflected image of the self. This reflection becomes a mirror image for the ego, but is at once ideal and always already unobtainable, thus undermining the primacy of the ego and further diminishing the subject.

Taking his lead from French psychologist Henri Wallon, Lacan argues that the Mirror stage occurs between the ages of six to eighteen months, when the child first observes its own reflection in a mirror and begins the identification process whereby it differentiates itself from the other\(^{10}\) — predominantly the mother or father. This recognition is based on the metaphysical image of a stable body, where previously the sites of corporal erotogenic pleasure were indefinable from those of the other. In *Ecrits* he explains the way that the child becomes fixated with this ideal image or ‘*imago*:

We have only to understand the mirror stage as an identification, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image — whose predestination to this phase-effect is sufficiently indicated by the use, in analytical theory, of the ancient term *imago*. This jubilant assumption of his specular image by the child at the *infans* stage, still sunk in his motor incapacity and nursling dependence, would seem to exhibit in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as a subject. This form would have to be called the Ideal-\(I\), if we wished to incorporate it into our usual register, in the same sense that it will also be the source of secondary identifications, under which term I would place the functions of libidinal normalization (1999:2).

For Lacan, the totalised representation of a stable image allows the child to overcome its dependent and incapacitated state by appropriating the reflection as an Ideal-\(I\), thus aiding in the development of the ego. The *imago* provides the child with an ideal perspective of wholeness over a previous fragmentation, and acts as a crutch, giving it the hope of a completeness it can strive to attain. However, this belief in the Ideal-\(I\) is
one based on a metaphysical Imaginary that is unattainable, and thereby precipitates yet another lack in the subject.

Lacan indicates that because this Ideal-I is based on an inverse reflection — and acts as an Imaginary representation — the initial development of the ego is based on an artifice that bears only a cursory visual resemblance to the child. He goes on to explain that the *imago* is not based on actuality but is in fact a fictional misrecognition by the ego, arguing that: “the important point is that this form situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction” (1999:2). As such, we can see that the comfort afforded the child through the appropriation of the *imago*, and the development of the ego, have no factual basis. Silverman adds weight to this argument explaining how the *imago* fragments the subject further: “[I]t must be stressed that the mirror stage is one of those crises of alienation around which the Lacanian subject is organized, since to know oneself through an external image is to be defined through self-alienation” (1983:157-8). That is, by basing itself on the ‘fictional’ metaphysical representation of the reflected *imago*, the ego sets out on a path of division whereby a fundamental and irrevocable lack is established between the ego and the Ideal-I. This creates self-alienation with the false promise of the *imago* resulting in a narcissistic desire in the subject for the wholeness of the Ideal-I, and a vacillation between the love and hate of an image that it can never attain, thus creating a further division that is apparently resolved with the child’s entrance into the symbolic order.

1.2c. The Symbolic and the Oedipus Complex

The next stage in the child’s entrance into the symbolic order becomes apparent — once again — with the advent of the Oedipus complex, yet Lacan’s view differs greatly from that of Freud for although various concepts are carried over, he moves away from Freud’s perspective of the primacy of the unconscious to a focus on the lack that language effects in the subject. As already seen, the entrance of the subject in the
symbolic order begins with the recognition of the falsity of the Ideal-I, and the loss of
the sense of wholeness it believed it once had. Reworking Freud’s ‘fort-da’ formulation,
Lacan posits that this lack — or fort — is not of the mother, but stems from this
essential loss of wholeness, a ‘fading’ or ‘disappearance’ of the subject, which,
borrowing the term from Ernest Jones, he refers to as ‘aphanisis’ (1986:207). Lacan
elucidates this process in *Ecrits* wherein he indicates that:

We can now grasp in this the fact that in this moment the subject is not simply
mastering his privation by assuming it, but that here he is raising his desire to a
second power. For his action destroys the object that it causes to appear and
disappear in the anticipating *provocation* of its absence and presence. His action thus
negatives the field of forces of desire in order to become its own object to itself […]
*Fort! Da!* It is precisely in his solitude that the desire of the little child has already
become the desire for another, of an *alter ego* who dominates him and whose object
of desire is henceforth his own affliction (1999:103-4).

Therefore, as the child recognises that the absence of the Ideal-I is an ineluctable lack,
the *fort/da* game begins to linguistically represent its entry into the symbolic order,
given that its desire for completeness cannot be obtained within the Imaginary order.
Having failed to find solace in the Other of the Imaginary reflection, the child turns this
lack into a desire for the symbolic Other, which it hopes will succeed in filling this *a
priori* void, and thus sate its desire for self-presence.

In order to explain this, Lacan posits the child’s relationship to the Oedipus
complex as one not based simply on the fear of castration due to its desire for its
mother, but rather that this passage is a linguistic process. Taking his lead from Lévi-
Strauss and his view of incest taboos in ‘primitive societies,’¹¹ Lacan posits that the
Oedipus complex is based on the cultural and linguistic recognition of the roles of the
mother and father, indicating yet another lack as the child realises its desire of its
mother — like the *imago* — can never be fulfilled. He highlights this process in relation
to language explaining that: “The primordial Law is therefore that which in regulating
marriage ties superimposes the kingdom of culture on that of a nature abandoned to the
law of mating. The prohibition of incest is merely its subjective pivot, revealed by the
modern tendency to reduce to the mother and the sister objects forbidden to the subject’s choice […] This law, then, is revealed clearly enough as identical with an order of language” (66). With his recognition of the linguistic and cultural nature of the Oedipus complex, Lacan, like Freud, then falls into his own theoretical determinism by applying Lévi-Strauss’ structuralist anthropological view of the incest taboo to the development of the subject. Despite this tendency, I shall now turn to Lacan’s reworking of the Oedipus complex as ‘identical’ with language, and the repercussions this had for the development of the Lacanian subject.

Although the role of the Oedipus complex remains more or less the same for both Freud and Lacan, it is a shift from the penis to the phallus that is important to this discussion. With this in mind it is the entrance of the subject into the symbolic order as a result of the ‘Name-of-the-Father,’ the function of the phallus in the differentiation of sexual roles, and the manner in which the subject is further diminished, that I shall now discuss. Sarup succinctly condenses Lacan’s complicated and convoluted take on the Oedipus complex and highlights the linguistic and cultural elements therein:

Lacan contends that at first the child does not merely desire contact with the mother and her care; it wishes, perhaps unconsciously, to be the complement of what is lacking in her: the phallus. At this stage the child is not a subject but a ‘lack,’ a nothing. In the second stage the father intervenes; he deprives the child of the object of its desire and he deprives the mother from the phallic object. The child encounters the Law of the father. The third stage is that of identification with the father. The father reinstates the phallus as the object of the mother’s desire and no longer as the child-complement to what is lacking in her. There is, then, a symbolic castration: the father castrates the child by separating it from its mother. This is the debt which must be paid if one is to become completely one’s self (1988:10).

While for Freud the child attain its preordained gender role by suppressing the Oedipus complex due to fear of the loss of the penis, and appropriate the role of the father, for Lacan this process takes on a far more symbolic role, whereby the phallus — as distinct from the biological penis — represents the Law of the ‘Name-of-the-Father.’ The recognition of the supremacy of the father for Lacan represents the acknowledgement of a variety of discursive cultural practices that among other characteristics will determine
sexual differentiation. This not only represents a further division between child and mother — as the Oedipus complex is repressed by the ‘Name-of-the-Father’ — it also initiates the child’s entry into the symbolic order as it becomes subject to the discursive practices of the ‘Law.’

Lacan’s appropriation of Saussure’s semiotic theory of signs indicates the manner in which the symbolic order initiates the ultimate division of the subject and undermines the metaphysical self-present individual. He explains the relationship between the subject and the signifier stating that: “it is in the chain of the signifier that the meaning ‘insists’ but that none of its elements ‘consists’ in the signification of which it is at the moment capable […] We are forced, then, to accept this notion of an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier” (1999:153-4). By inverting the Saussurian algorithm Lacan replaces the cogito with the symbolic signifier — by locating the subject within the symbolic order, as seen with the ‘Name-of-the-Father’ — and with final signification proven problematic, he posits an irrevocably divided subject. He argues that upon entering the Symbolic order, the child begins a relationship with a chain of cultural signifiers that have no fixed meaning and simply refer to other signifiers, thus undermining the possibility of self-presence. However, he does qualify this, stating that: “All of our experience runs counter to this linearity, which made me speak once […] of something more like anchoring points (‘points de caption’) as a schema for taking into account the dominance of the letter in the dramatic transformation that dialogue can effect in the subject” (154). Importantly, Lacan recognises that without the illusion of fixed signifiers there would be no meaning, indicating the impact that an arbitrary system of signs alone has on the subject, and the inherent need for the metaphysics of comfort.

This child’s entrance into the symbolic order manifests itself when, after its mythic castration, it accepts its culturally defined gender role, and quells its desire for
the Ideal ego by endeavouring to attain the ultimate representation of that role. That is, for Lacan, subjectivity is always already located in the symbolic and this, he argues, makes it irreducible from language and culture. Silverman supports this position stating that: “Language is consequently not the only source of signifiers; dietary rituals, marriage ceremonies, hysteria, conventions of dress, and neuroses all generate signifiers. Indeed, since signification constitutes the matrix within which the subject resided after its entry into the symbolic order, nothing escapes cultural value” (1983:164-5). Therefore, the subject’s entry into the symbolic order is represented by the interpellation of culturally designated discursive roles. This undermines the possibility of the subject attaining any originary sense of individuality, leaving it irrevocably diminished given that all acceptable modes of expression are inherently linguistic, arbitrary in nature, and thereby culturally determined.

With this in mind, criticisms of Lacan that level the spectre of phallocentrism overlook the fact that the phallus represents a privileged signifier in a symbolic order, and exemplifies the dominant cultural discourses of patriarchy, which he views as a linguistic system. As such, his attitude towards sexual differentiation differs greatly from Freud’s, for when arguing that ‘Woman does not exist,’ Lacan was indicating that the role of the woman in society is symbolic. That is, the predominant cultural relationship between man and woman is one based on a system of differences located in language, presupposing that the dominant cultural discourses that perpetuate biased gender roles are not a priori, but necessarily open to the condition of the possibility of change due to their linguistic and inherently arbitrary nature.

While Lacan’s conception of the subject is based on both a lack and desire for the other, his appropriation Saussure’s theory of signs and Lévi-Strauss’ incest taboo led him to posit his own theory of subjectivity as determined and divided by language. That is, once the child enters the symbolic order and becomes subject to the Law of the
‘Name-of-the-Father,’ it engages in a linguistic process whereby it is culturally determined and sexually differentiated by language. This view of the subject defined by its other led Lacan to carry out his own reworking of Descartes’ cogito in *Ecrits* that focussed on the linguistic elements as: “I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think” (1999:166). This continuing development of the cogito from Descartes through to Lacan has had important repercussions for the study of subjectivity, for as Malcolm Bowie explains:

The subject is irremediably split in and by language, but ‘modern man’ still has not learned his lesson. He thinks himself wonderfully astute for parading his doubts and uncertainties — where Descartes had striven merely to rescue himself from his — but he does not understand that the trust he places in language, even as he prates about his doubts, is in a direct line of descent for the cogito. After Freud, there is no one ‘thought’ on which to base the existential proposition ‘I think therefore I am’ or such modern derivatives [...] And after Lacan, there is no simple, signifying level that would allow an appropriate psychoanalytic counter-proposal to be made. Hence the cogito is not flatly repudiated; its terms and propositional structure are refashioned in a sequence of parodic alternatives (1991:77).

Therefore, Lacan’s interest in language represents a break from the philosophical tradition of the cogito that prioritises the primacy of self-present consciousness, and from Freud’s continuation of this tradition, despite his shift in focus from the conscious to the unconscious. It was this that led Lacan to make his famous proclamation: “*the unconscious is structured like a language*” (1986:20), and in doing so irredeemably fragmented the subject and set Lacan apart from Freud and other psychoanalysts.

Lacan expresses the importance of the linguistic process — and his own break with Freud — when he states that the recognition of language in the constitution of the subject: “is to deny oneself access to what might be called the Freudian universe — in the way that we speak of the Copernican universe. It was in fact the so-called Copernican revolution to which Freud himself compared his discovery, emphasizing that it was once again a question of the place man assigns to himself at the centre of the universe” (1999:165). Lacan argues that despite Freud’s shift from the cogito to his propositions regarding the unconscious, he still located conscious meaning within the
individual ego, and not culture and language, resulting in a metaphysical and ego-based psychoanalysis. Whereas Freud can be seen to be carrying on the humanist tradition, Lacan’s appropriation of theories of language decentres the subject in a manner often viewed as anti-humanist. While Freud believed psychoanalysis could uncover the workings of the human mind and cure its neuroses, the early Lacan — at least — argued that subjectivity existed as part of an endless chain of signifiers and was necessarily Other to itself. Although language offered a way into the unconscious for Lacan, its arbitrary and metaphysical nature always already denied a complete understanding of the unconscious, thus evoking the condition of the possibility of change, and thereby justifying the possibility of the a priori diminished subject,

1.3.a. Julia Kristeva and the Subject of Revolutionary Language

The semiological approach identifies itself [...] as an anti-humanism which outmodes those debates — still going on even now — between philosophers, where one side argues for a transcendence with an immanent ‘human’ causality while the other argues for an ‘ideology’ whose cause is external and therefore transcendent; but where neither shows any awareness of the linguistic and, at a more general level, semiotic logic of the sociality in which the [...] subject is embedded. — Julia Kristeva, in ‘The System and the Speaking Subject’ (1992:25-6).

Having outlined the manner in which Lacan’s increased focus on both the linguistic and symbolic diminishes the subject, I shall now turn to Julia Kristeva and her redevelopment of his work, focussing specifically on the relationship between semiotics and the subject, which at once divides and explores positive alternative expressions of subjectivity. Kristeva’s oeuvre can be divided into three main periods beginning firstly with her investigation into Saussurian linguistics and the possibility of formalising poetic language: secondly came her focus on the relationship between poetic language and the subject, and the manner in which the semiotic works alongside the symbolic in the constitution of gender roles: while thirdly, she explored the notion of abjection, feminist theory, and the transgressive capabilities of poetic writing. However, for the purpose of this section, I shall focus on those aspects that support my discussion of
psychoanalysis in relation to the diminished subject, and her view of the literary as a site of contestation opposed to dominant cultural representations of subjectivity.

1.3.b. Kristeva and Semanalysis

Kristeva’s initial theoretical position, as outlined in ‘Word, Dialogue and Novel’ and Le texte du roman, was based on a conviction of the impossibility of a linguistic formalisation of poetic language. She was interested in the inherent materiality of language as represented by the speaking subject, something that had been largely ignored by theorists such as Saussure who focussed mainly on the systematic structure of langue. This positions Kristeva among the likes of Bakhtin — whom she translated — and his notion of the ‘carnival’ and ‘dialogic novel,’ and with Barthes with his interest in the ‘writerly text.’ Rather than viewing language as the simple conveyer of meaning Kristeva was interested in the heterogeneous nature of poetic language that escaped the oppression of strict scientific understanding and symbolic representation. For Kristeva the locus of poetic language could be found within the semiotic, and she developed her notion of ‘semanalysis’ as a way focusing on the ‘outside’ of language — that which remained unanalysable to the determinism of structuralist linguistics.

The importance of Kristeva’s semanalysis can be located in her view of semiotics in relation to the speaking subject, whereby she highlights the manner that heterogeneous language undermine the primacy of the individual and further problematise the tradition of self-present consciousness as seen with the cogito, and Husserl’s ‘transcendental ego.’ This decentring of the subject is clearly manifest in Kristeva’s ‘The System and the Speaking Subject,’ wherein she explains that:

The theory of meaning now stands at a crossroad: either it will remain an attempt at formalizing meaning-systems by increasing sophistication of the logico-mathematics tools which enable it to formulate models on the basis of a conception [...] of meaning as the act of a transcendental ego, cut off from its body, its unconscious and its history; or else it will attune itself to the theory of the speaking subject as a divided subject (conscious/unconscious) and go on to attempt to specify the types of operation characteristic of the two sides of this split, thereby exposing them to those
forces extraneous to the logic of the systematic; exposing them, that is to say, on the one hand, to bio-physiological processes ([...] what Freud has labelled ‘drives’); and, on the other hand, to social constraints (family structures, modes of production, etc.). In following this latter path, semiology, or, as I have suggested calling it, *semanalysis*, conceives of meaning not as a sign system but as a *signifying process*. Within this process one might see the release and subsequent articulation of the drives as constrained by the social code yet not reducible to language (1992:28).

That is, by focussing on the heterogeneous nature of language, as represented by the semiotic Kristeva not only highlights the importance of the materiality of language, but also questions the predominance of the Symbolic. Her focus on the development of the subject and the primacy of the conscious I, problematised dominant cultural formations by virtue of their inherently discursive nature. By not being ‘reducible to language’ the semiotic — as a signifying practice — highlights the non-symbolic aspects of subjectivity — those elements that escape the representation of language and create a division between the semiotic and symbolic, or unconscious and conscious — which remain after the subject enters the symbolic order. Therefore, Kristeva proposed that within the semiotic there remained access to the unconscious pre-symbolic individual that is not completely separated from the subject of the symbolic order.

For Kristeva the importance of both semiotics and poetic language is that they remain unanalysable and beyond the symbolic and its oppressive re-presentations. Therefore, the semiotic represents the possibility of transgressive expressions of subjectivity that exist extraneous to the symbolic order, and thereby undermine it. In his text *Julia Kristeva*, John Lechte explains the possible counter-discursive nature of the semiotic and the materiality of language for the speaking subject, arguing that:

The ‘outside’ of language became its non-systematizable, dynamic, and even non-formalizable aspect — the aspect of ‘play, pleasure or desire.’ This is the aspect of the body’s imprint in language, a body bound up with a potentially transgressive (because un-scientific) practice. Kristeva was thus beginning to argue that the place of the body (the ‘outside’ of language according to conventional linguistics), should not only become the legitimate concern of semiotics as such, but perhaps even become its *raison d’être*. In a fundamental way, the nature of meaning is distorted if it is reduced to what is possible within the conventional framework of communication. The body, moreover, is the place where we ‘are’ as speaking beings; it is the place of the material support of the language of communication (1990:99).
In other words, it is Kristeva’s view that through the analysis of the semiotic materiality of language, as expressed by the speaking subject, dominant cultural discourses such as the ‘Name-of-the-Father’ — which oppress the subject by prescribing socially acceptable modes of expression — can be defamiliarised. As such, Kristeva’s work represents a radical shift from that of Lacan, for rather than viewing subjectivity as the result of the repression of the Oedipus complex — an effect of the primacy of the phallus that makes the subject symbolically determined by language — she proposed that the initial development of the subject is located in the pre-symbolic or semiotic stage. The result being that certain aspects of subjectivity always already escape the determination of the symbolic order, thus undermining the deterministic oppression of the individual by the ‘Law’ and all it represents.

1.2.c. Kristeva and the Semiotic Subject

The relevance of Kristeva’s work to this investigation into the diminished subject becomes manifest with her reworking of Lacan’s view of the subject of language, cut off from the drives of the pre-Oedipal stages, following its entrance into the symbolic realm. In her seminal work, *The Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva sets about investigating the unanalysable and pre-symbolic through the distinction of the semiotic and the symbolic. Her view is distinct from traditional semiotics due to its interest in the ‘genotext’ rather than the ‘phenotext,’ or language as communication. The genotext, she argues, is that which is non-linguistic and predates the symbolic, yet the two necessarily work together in order to provide a signifying process. Interestingly, Kristeva moves still further away from Lacan’s position, stating that the genotext — or semiotic — is a representation of the subject prior to its division and entrance into the symbolic:

What we shall call a genotext will include the semiotic processes but also the advent of the symbolic. The former includes drives, their disposition, and their division of the body, plus ecological and social systems surrounding the body, such as objects and pre-Oedipal relations with their parents. The latter encompasses the emergence
of object and subject, and the constitution of nuclei of meaning involving categories: semantic and categorical fields [...] The genotext is thus the only transfer of drive energies that organize a space in which the subject is not yet a split unity that will become blurred, giving rise to the symbolic. Instead, the space it organizes is one in which the subject will be generated as such by a process of facilitation and marks within the constraints of the biological and social structure. In other words, even though it can be seen in language, the genotext is not linguistic (1984:86).

Despite obvious comparisons with Lacan’s pre-Oedipal territorialization of the infant and the mirror stage as mere precursors for the entry of the child into the phallic symbolic order, Kristeva believed that infantile subjectivity begins in the pre-symbolic order. Not only is this semiotic phase instrumental for the satisfactory entrance of the child into the symbolic order, it also remains part of the signifying process. As such, the pre-Oedipal division of the subject manifests itself with the structuring of the libidinal drives of the oral and anal stages, and the social and biological differentiation of the sexes that, for Kristeva, despite being pre-linguistic, manifest themselves as semiotic language. Furthermore, that she predates the entrance of the child into the social realm as semiotic and prior to the symbolic, questions the distinct break proposed by Lacan and further divides the subject, for although the semiotic represents the pre-Oedipal separation of the child from both the mother and libidinal drives, it also exists as part of the signifying process. For Kristeva, this means that the semiotic gives access to a previously unrepresented pre-symbolic unconscious, thus proposing that the unconscious exists both within the semiotic and alongside the symbolic subject.

Despite Kristeva dividing the subject further by suggesting that the semiotic and symbolic processes represent two co-existing, yet disparate aspects of subjectivity — that which is already diminished due to its discursive and linguistic nature — her proposal that the locus of the semiotic — that which is unanalysable and unnameable — is the mother, has had important ramifications for feminist theory, and seen by many as questioning the seemingly hopeless position of the linguistically and culturally
determined symbolic subject. For Kristeva, the site of the semiotic and the instigator of the initial constraints of libidinal drives, is the mother or *chora*, and explains that:

Drives involve pre-Oedipal semiotic functions and energy discharges that connect and orientate the body to the mother. We must emphasize that ‘drives’ are always already ambiguous, simultaneously assimilating and destructive; this dualism [...] makes the semiotized body the place of permanent scission. The oral and anal drives, both of which are orientated and structured around the mother’s body, dominate this sensorimotor organization. The mother’s body is therefore what mediates the ordering principle of the semiotic *chora* (27).

According to Kristeva the *chora* organises and dictates the pre-Oedipal territorialization of the child’s body according to its biological function before it enters the symbolic order. While this begins with the attention paid to the corporeal zones of the body by the mother, unlike Lacan she believes that this semiotic process of repetition and constraint ultimately manifests itself as a site of negativity. She points out that: “the semiotic *chora* is no more than the place where the subject is both generated and negated, the place where his unity succumbs before the process of charges and stases that produce him [...] We shall call this process [...] a *negativity*” (28). As such, the semiotic represents the locus of the initial division of the subject and site of an originary sense of loss. Rather, than seeing these drives as repressed by the symbolic order following the child’s entry into language, Kristeva suggests that with its involvement in the signifying process that this negative repression of libidinal drives becomes a possible site of contestation against the dominant phallocentric symbolic order.

It is important to note here that despite the semiotic being located in the *chora* — by virtue of its pre-symbolic phase — the fact that it is located with the mother does not presuppose that the semiotic itself is represented by the feminine. As Madan Sarup explains: “We should remember that the fluid motility of the semiotic is associated with the pre-Oedipal phase and therefore with the pre-Oedipal mother, but Kristeva makes it quite clear that [...] she sees the pre-Oedipal mother as a figure that encompasses both masculinity and femininity. This fantasmatic figure, which looms as large for baby boys
as for baby girls, cannot be reduced to an example of femininity, for the simple reason
that the opposition between feminine and masculine does not exist in pre-Oedipality.
The semiotic, in short, is not to be associated with the feminine” (1992:142). For
Kristeva, the unnameable *chora* must remain just that, for to be represented requires it
entering the discursively symbolic order and face being subject to the limits inherent
therein. Thus, the semiotic must not be associated with the feminine due to the
limitations this symbolic function serves and its relation to the ‘Name-of-the-father’
and, in turn, phallocentric society. For the same reason Kristeva, unlike Luce Irigaray,
does not call for a type of ‘écriture feminine,’ as this would reiterate and legitimate the
symbolic order by simply inverting it. Therefore, by virtue of its non-symbolic nature,
she sees the semiotic as a locus outside of language for the symbolic order and a site
free of the oppression of dominant cultural discourses. It is this that makes the semiotic
a possible site of contestation, but in order for it to be so it must be represented in a
form that escapes signification, and for Kristeva poetic language succeeds in doing this.

Adopting certain aspects of Lacan’s ‘Mirror stage,’ Kristeva highlights the
importance of the Other in the process of signification, viewing it as essential to the
development of the subject. As already seen, when the child enters the mirror stage it is
first faced with the *imago* of the Ideal-I, and then with the possibility of castration it is
torn from the mother and enters the symbolic order with an acceptance of the primacy
of the phallus. This at once separates the child from its first love object, and creates a
division between the pre-Oedipal and the symbolic subject, introducing the concept of
the Other in its formation. Kristeva, on the other hand, suggests that this is not a clean
break but rather gives rise to the ‘thetic,’ or division, between the semiotic and symbolic
which she views as: “the place of the other, as the precondition for signification, i.e., the
precondition for the positing of language. The thetic marks a threshold between two
heterogeneous realms: the semiotic and the symbolic” (1984:48). However, the thetic,
as the boundary between the semiotic and symbolic, enables signification by presupposing the Other — as in the signified/signifier division — thus making the semiotic a precondition of the symbolic. By virtue of this fact Kristeva posits the importance of the semiotic in the process of signification, and highlights the functionality of the Other as an ineluctable aspect of communication, and thereby diminishes the subject further.

1.3.d. Poetic Language and Transgression

Having explained the relationship between Kristeva’s view of the semiotic and my own notion of the diminished subject, I shall now turn my focus to the transgressive capabilities of poetic language and the possible implications for the subject. For Kristeva, the thetic divide between the semiotic and symbolic — that separation between the pre- and post-Oedipal stages — is of paramount importance in the practice of signification. However, she sees this boundary as permeable, viewing poetic language as that which transgresses the thetic, something Lechte explains thus:

[T]he thetic is also the precondition of the difference between signifier and signified, denotation and connotation, language and referent; in effect it is the basis of all theses and antitheses, of all oppositions. As Kristeva notes […] there is no language without the thetic; it is a necessary boundary originating in the mirror stage and is the basis of all structural relations. Mention of the mirror stage links the thetic clearly with the symbolic paternal function — the condition of signification and representation. When, in a poetic work, the semiotic violates the order of the symbolic, the thetic itself is challenged (1990:135).

For Kristeva then, poetic language transgresses the demarcation between the semiotic and symbolic as it escapes final signification. This not only calls into question the primacy of the symbolic order — including the Law of the Name-of-the-Father — but also the notion of language as a transparent conveyor of meaning and, in turn, the self-presence of the symbolic and discursive subject of contemporary culture. That is, unlike Lacan, Kristeva optimistically posits this permeability of the semiotic/symbolic orders as both transgressive and empowering for the subject, suggesting that although the
subject is further diminished, possible alternative expressions of subjectivity can exist outside of and counter to the dominant symbolic order.

As we have already seen, the repression of the libidinal drives of the infant and the separation from the mother results in a negativity that is suppressed as the child enters the symbolic order. However, unlike the neurotic suffering from the incomplete repression of the Oedipus complex in Freud, or the narcissist incapable of identifying with the Other in Lacan, Kristeva believes that pre-symbolic drives can transgress the thetic and have a structuring effect on the symbolic. She explains this when arguing that: “Though absolutely necessary, the thetic is not exclusive: the semiotic which also precedes it, constantly tears it open, and this transgression brings about all the various transformations of the signifying practice that are called ‘creation.’ Whether in the realm of metalanguage […] or literature, what remodels the symbolic order is always the influx of the semiotic” (1984:62). For Kristeva, the permeability of the thetic and the transgression of the semiotic into the symbolic differ from the views of Freud and Lacan, who both arrived at their own metaphysical conclusions regarding the development of the subject. Whereas Freud considered the Oedipus complex, and Lacan language, as the primary processes which dictate subjectivity, Kristeva — while still guilty of her own form of metaphysics — attempted to undermine the seemingly monolithic and oppressive ‘Law’ of the ‘Name-of-the-Father,’ by positing the influence of the pre-symbolic, and thus pre-gendered, individual in the function of the symbolic order, and by locating the site of this contestation in poetic language.

According to Freud and Lacan, there always already exists the possibility of the symbolic subject falling victim to pre-Oedipal drives, which can manifest themselves as neuroses or psychotic behaviour. However, where they posit the use of psychoanalysis to deal with such disorders and to reinstate the subject in the symbolic order, Kristeva — who much later became a psychologist — was interested in the transgressive nature
of the eruptions of the semiotic into the symbolic. Yet despite her view of the oppression of the subject in phallocentric society, she resisted calls to abandon both the Other and difference as a way of creating sexual equality, as it was her belief that the relationship between the semiotic and symbolic, and resultant process of signification, was indispensable. She explains this by pointing out that extreme eruptions of negativity from the libidinal drives can have disastrous results for the subject:

In the extreme, negativity aims to foreclose the thetic phase, which, after a period of explosive semiotic motility, may result in the loss of symbolic function, as seen in schizophrenia. ‘Art’ on the other hand, by definition, does not relinquish the thetic even while pulverizing it through the negativity of transgression. Indeed, this is the only means of transgressing the thetic, and the difficulty of maintaining the symbolic function under the assault of negativity indicates the risk that textual practice represents for the subject. What had seemed to be a process of fetishizing inherent in the way the text functions now seems a structurally necessary protection, one that serves to check negativity, confine it within stases, and prevent it from sweeping away the symbolic order (68-9).

Kristeva indicates that the abandonment of the Other in the process of signification would result in the end of communication, as the loss of the thetic would preclude the end of meaning, or in the schizophrenic’s case would result in non-sense. Instead, she proposes the investigation of poetic language — with its links to the semiotic and pre-symbolic individual — due to its ability to transgress the thetic division without rupturing it completely. This has the potential of influencing the constitution of the subject by soothing the symbolic through a process of catharsis, which sees the work of literature control the negativity of the libidinal drives. Therefore, for Kristeva a locus for the subject attempting to free itself of the restrictions of the dominant symbolic order could not be extraneous to language, because this would result in it being inevitably othered by the ‘Law.’ Thus, the subject is always already diminished due to the arbitrary nature of language, the limitations placed on the individual forced to use this medium, and with the interpellation of discursively derived cultural practices. As a compromise, she posits that poetic language could act as a site of contestation,
proving to be a fertile expression of alternative and counter-discursive subjectivity that
must necessarily use the available discourses of that which it seeks to undermine.

The importance of poetic and literary works in relation to subjectivity is of the
utmost interest to Kristeva, and continues my focus on the importance of literature with
relation to subjectivity, as seen with Freud and the myth of Oedipus, and of language in
the constitution of the subject in Lacan. Kristeva highlights this when arguing that: “If
there exists a ‘discourse’ which is not a mere depository of thin linguistic layers, an
archive of structures, or the testimony of the withdrawn body, and is, instead the
essential element of a practice involving the sum of unconscious, subjective, and social
relations in gestures of confrontation and appropriation, destruction and construction —
productive violence, in short — it is ‘literature,’ or, more specifically, the text” (16). For
Kristeva, the work of literature mimics the relationship between the semiotic and the
symbolic, and the ‘productive violence’ within the text represents a manifestation of the
production of the subject and, in many cases, uses metaphor as a catharsis to redirect the
negative libidinal drives which could disrupt meaningful and productive signification.

As Lechte points out: “to be challenged by art is to be confronted by the void of non-
meaning and the prospect of our own hell, our own suffering caused by a loss of
identity inducing our melancholies and the truly tragic aspect of being. Kristeva shows,
too — in her writing of love and art — that this suffering is also the way to a
‘resurrection’ as a renewal of the self in language. Once, to ‘travel to hell’ was possible:
for God was love (agape); now, God is dead and we are alone and afraid of the
challenge of the void” (1990:219). For Kristeva, the work of literature enables us to
reflect on our position as the subject of the symbolic order, and fictional representations
of subjectivity that escape (re)presentation due to their semiotic nature can propose
alternative expressions of subjectivity to those which are culturally determined and
limiting. Thus, she indicates the possibility of a literature that is both political and
philosophical, which includes counter-discursive explorations of fictional forms of subjectivity that attempt to escape the constraints of dominant cultural practices.

That Kristeva’s later work focussed on the relationship between subjectivity and artistic representation is apparent in her books, *The Power of Horror* and *Tales of Love*. Alluding to her notion of the artistic ‘subject in process,’ Lechte states that: “Kristeva’s work over the last decade can be seen as a series of specific elaborations of a theory of the subject. There can be no final elaboration. For Kristeva presents a subject which is never entirely analysable, but rather one always incomplete: the subject in which dynamics of subjectivity are seen by Kristeva to be played out in this artistic space […] Thus while an artistic work must exhibit indications of human control and order for it to be identified as such, there is no complete subject prior to the work. Rather, artistic endeavour constitutes the subject as much as the subject constitutes the work of art” (1994:143). In other words, Kristeva views artistic representations of subjectivity as a site of contestation and transgression, while her texts play out the heterogeneous nature of signification and posit hypothetical alternative modes of expression, suggesting that as the subject is always in progress and never self-present, it can be justifiably constituted by the work of art as much as by the symbolic order. She explains that: “This heterogeneous process, neither anarchic, fragmented foundation nor schizophrenic blockage, is a structuring and de-structuring practice, a passage to the outer boundaries of the subject and society. Then — and only then— can it be jouissance and revolution” (1984:17). And it is through the ‘structuring and ‘de-structuring’ of being carried out in literature that we can explore the outer limits of subjectivity and society and, in her view, effect some form of ‘re-structuring.’

Kristeva’s perspective at once defamiliarises the seemingly monolithic cultural and economic discourses of phallocentric society, yet proposes possible positive alternatives to them. This has major implications for the subject diminished by these
discursive practices as it illuminates their arbitrary nature and provides a locus for the transgression of dominant expressions of subjectivity and sexuality. This, in turn, undermines the symbolic representation of gender roles, which predominate, dictate and ultimately oppress those who choose counter-discursive alternatives. Therefore, although Kristeva proposes that the subject is always already ‘in progress’ and never fully self-present, she optimistically indicates that by virtue of their symbolic nature these expressions of subjectivity are always already susceptible to the condition of the possibility of change, and that a valid locus for the potential discontinuity of oppressive discourses can be located in the poetic.

1.4.a. In Summation — Chapter 1

By way of summation then, we can view Freudian psychoanalysis as a discourse in progress that was determined to uncover the inner working of the human mind in order to gain greater access to its function, and to cure any potential crises within. However, quite the obverse was achieved as Freud’s initial focus on the unconscious not only diminished the subject by undermining the primacy of the cogito, his ego-based propositions complicated and multiplied this division further, leading him into an aporia that relied on the metaphysical discourses of mythology and language to support his theses. In turn, this increased focus on the impact of language and subjectivity led Lacan to develop his ficto-critical perspective of the discursively determined subject, and his impression of a fundamentally diminished individual suffering from an irrevocable lack, and eternally searching for an always already absent metaphysical and self-present Ideal-I. While finally, Kristeva’s work focussed on defamiliarising the manner in which metaphysical phallocentric discourses — such as Freudian psychoanalysis — oppress and determine the sexual subject. In opposition to this limiting perspective she optimistically posited the poetic as a site for transgressive
explorations of alternative forms of subjectivity that are always already in progress, permanently diminished, and subject to the condition of the possibility of change.

Notes:

1 Written by Sophocles c. 445 King Oedipus tells of how it was prophesied that Oedipus would kill his father and marry his mother. Abandoned by his parents in the mountains, but saved by a shepherd to grow up in distant lands, he learns of this fate as an adult, but not realising his adopted status Oedipus flees and arrives in Thebes, his birthplace, and unwittingly kills King Laius, his father. After being declared King, following his defeat of the Sphinx that was besieging the city, he married Jocasta, his mother, who begets him several children. In an interesting twist to the tale as Oedipus searches for the truth of his birth and becomes aware of what he has committed, whereby Jocasta berates him stating: “Doomed man! O never live to learn the truth!” (1985:55). As a cautionary tale this could be read as a critique of those who spend their lives searching for a truth which may cause them to forsake their own happiness, for upon realising his responsibility for the death of his father and Jocasta’s suicide, Oedipus stabs out his eyes in disgust and echoing the dominant cultural perspective regarding the incest taboo states: “That silent crossroads in the forest clearing — That copse besides the place where three roads met, Whose soil I watered with my father’s blood, My blood — Will they remember what they saw, And what I came to Thbes to do? Incestuous sin! Breeding where I was bred! Father, brother, and son; bride, wife, and mother; Confounded in one monstrous matrimony! All human filthiness is one crime compounded! Unspeakable acts — I speak no more of them. Hide me at once, for God’s love, hide me away, Away! Kill me! Drown me in the depths of the sea!” (1985:64).

2 Homosexuality is viewed as a psychoneurosis that results in the identification with the sexually reciprocal parent from the failure of the repression of the Oedipus complex. In the Ego and the Id Freud states that: “[T]he more complete Oedipus complex, which is twofold, positive and negative, and is due to the bisexuality originally present in children: that is to say, a boy has not merely an ambivalent attitude towards his father and an affectionate object-choice towards his mother, but at the same time he also behaves like a girl and displays an affectionate feminine attitude towards his father and a corresponding hostility towards his mother [...] The relative intensity of the two identifications in any individual will reflect the preponderance in him of one or another of the two sexual dispositions” (1978:33-34).

3 This footnote to ‘The Ego and the Id’ indicates Freud’s view that it is the development of the infant up to the repression of the Oedipus complex that creates a sexually divided subject: “[W]e find in a letter to Fleiss (Freud, 1950a, Letter 113, of August 1, 1899): ‘Bisexuality! I am sure you are right about it. I am accustomed myself to regards every sexual act as an event between four individuals’” (1978:33). For Freud then, any later eruption of bisexuality is due to the failure to repress the Oedipus complex, viewing it as a neurosis and neither a biological imperative, nor a personal choice.

4 In The Subject of Semiotics Silverman explains Freud’s concept of the preconscious in depth stating that: “the preconscious acquires the status of a censor, blocking the entrance of those wishes it deems unacceptable, as well as the memories associated with those wishes. The preconscious comes to exercise a repressive authority, determining not only which unconscious materials may gain access to the conscious, but the shape those materials must take. The pleasure principle operates unchecked in the unconscious, exerting a particularly strong pressure through the first wishes which were refused access to the conscious — infantile impulses, generally of an Oedipal nature. These impulses, Freud argues, constitute the motivating force of dreams (as well as parapraxes, jokes, day-dreams, and neuroses), which are by nature wish fulfilling. However, both wish and fulfilment must be thoroughly disguised or they will be rejected by the preconscious” (1983:60-1).

5 Freud further elucidates the complicated relationship between the unconscious and the preconscious in The Interpretation of Dreams, indicating that: “the unconscious (that is, the psychical) is found as a function of two separate systems and that this is the case in normal as well as in pathological life. Thus there are two kinds of unconscious, which have not yet been distinguished by psychologists. Both of them are unconscious in the sense used by psychology; but in our sense one of them, which we term the Ucs, is also inadmissible to consciousness, while we term the other the Pcs. because its excitations — after observing certain rules, it is true, and perhaps only after passing a fresh censorship, though nonetheless without regard to the Ucs, — are able to reach conscious [...] We have described the relations of the two systems to each other and to consciousness by saying that the system Pcs. stands like a screen between the system Ucs. and consciousness” (1983:775-6).

6 That the subject is diminished in Freud’s work is supported by Silverman, who argues that: “The Freudian subject is above all a partitioned subject, incapable of exhaustive self-knowledge. Its parts do not exist harmoniously; they speak different languages and operate on the basis of conflicting
imperatives. The analyst functions as a kind of interpreter, establishing communication between the various sectors” (1983:132).

7 For a full explanation of the relationship between the id, ego and super-ego refer to ‘The Id and the Ego,’ while the following quote acts a good summary of Freud’s perspective: “[T]he ego is formed to a great extent out of identifications which the take place of abandoned cathexes by the id; that the first of these identifications always behave as a special agency in the ego and stand apart from the ego in the form of the super-ego, while later on, as it grows stronger, the ego may become more resistant to the influences of such identifications. The super-ego owes its special position in the ego, or in relation to the ego, to a factor which must be considered from two sides: on the one hand it was the first identification and one which took place while the ego was still feeble, and on the other hand it is the heir to the Oedipus complex and has thus introduced the most momentous objects into the ego […] Although it is accessible to all later influences, it nevertheless preserves throughout life the character given to it by its derivation from the father-complex — namely, the capacity to stand apart from the ego and to master it. It is a memorial of the former weakness and dependence of the ego, and the ego remains subject to its domination. As the child was once under the compulsion to obey its parents, so the ego submits to the categorical imperatives of its super-ego” (1978:48)

8 I must point out that Freud primarily discusses this and most other processes in terms of the boy. There are clearly serious problems with his development of the female subject, as I have already discussed, but rather than dealing with this complicated issue at length I have decided, in order to aid simplicity, to follow his discussion of the male.


10 Lacan is indebted here to the pioneering work of Melanie Klein, and her notions of the lack of differentiation between infants, whereby if one begins crying so too will the other, and of her interest in aggressiveness in the pre-symbolic child.


12 For the various accounts of the ‘Name-of-the-Father’ see Écrits, Section C: Note b (1999:328).

13 See Saussure’s Course in General Linguistics.

14 Sarup expands on Lacan’s position pointing out that: “While Saussure formulated the signified on top, Lacan puts the signifier on top — to give it pre-eminence. He argued that signifiers are combined in a signifying chain. Meaning does not arise in the individual signifier but in the connection between signifiers. Saussure had admitted that there can occur a shift or sliding (glissement) in the relationship between the signifier and signified. In contrast, Lacan argues not only that the two realms of signifier and signified are never united, but that there is an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier. This does not mean that there are no moments of stability at all. Lacan suggests that there are ‘anchoring points’ […] which stop the sliding signifiers and fix their meaning” (1992:90).

15 Edmund Husserl’s work and the ‘transcendental ego’ are explained at length in the next chapter.

16 A discussion pertaining to language and subjectivity will be expanded in the following chapter, and in particular in the section on Jacques Derrida.
Chapter 2

Phenomenology, Deconstruction and the Diminished Subject — Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida

2.1.a. Edmund Husserl — Phenomenology the Divided Theorist

With a mind to investigating the theoretical football that is, or perhaps is not, the crisis of postmodernism, its apparent condition, and its effect on contemporary subjectivity in relation to the *aporia* of the diminished subject, the work of Edmund Husserl makes for a pertinent starting point. It was Husserl’s belief that a strict phenomenological approach could bring about a complete understanding of consciousness and being, arguing repeatedly that ‘European man’ was suffering from certain crises that prevented traditional philosophy from reaching this ‘Archimedean point.’ He viewed these crises as the result of the failure of philosophy and psychoanalysis to provide a theoretical certitude of subjectivity, and urged for a return of reason in the face of growing scepticism toward these once respected metaphysical disciplines. In ‘Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man,’ he argues that: “it is important for our problem of the crisis to show how it is that the ‘modern age,’ that has for centuries been so proud of its successes in theory and practice, has itself finally fallen into a growing dissatisfaction and must even look upon its own situation as distressful” (1965:185). Thus, Husserl believed that the subject of his day was suffering from a lack of faith in the ability of philosophy to escape an apparent *aporia* by which the very foundations of society, rationality and reason, had been proven vulnerable, due to a reliance on certain less theoretically rigorous metaphysical postulations. With this in mind, this discussion of Husserl will investigate his attempts to reinstate philosophical reason through the study of knowable phenomena and cure the ills of ‘European man,’ the problems associated with this approach, his own doubts regarding his undertaking, and his mostly unacknowledged influence on contemporary theory.
It was Husserl’s contention that the ‘crises’ that beset European culture were the result of the inherently questionable postulations of traditional philosophy and — more recently — those of psychoanalysis, believing that the metaphysical nature of their formulations left them open to the vagaries of scepticism, resulting in a loss of reason and rationalism — the very things that separated ‘man’ from ‘beast.’ Consequently he proposed a phenomenological approach to study the conscious subject, as opposed to the traditional focus on the dualism of the Cartesian *cogito* and contemporary psychoanalytic interest in the unconscious, claiming that both had failed to make inroads into the understanding of the subject *in toto*, and had lost credibility with their unproven metaphysical propositions. Thus, phenomenology became the ‘great-white-hope’ of not only philosophy, but also of culture and subjectivity in general. Rudiger Safranski explains this view of the phenomenological panacea in *Martin Heidegger: Between Good and Evil*, wherein he states that:

[D]uring the first postwar years, this specialized subject turned into what was almost an ideological hope. Hans-Georg Gadamer [a student of Husserl’s] reports that, at the beginning of the 1920s, when ‘slogans about the decline of the West [were] omnipresent,’ the subject of phenomenology was included, alongside the teachings of Max Weber, Karl Marx, and Kierkegaard, among the countless suggestions put forwards at a ‘Discussion among World Improvers’ (1999:71).

That is, rather than phenomenology being yet another speculative metaphysical philosophy, Husserl believed, among others, that this new science of subjectivity would uncover, and guarantee with certitude, the truth of consciousness, and address a perceived decline in European culture.

It is important to note that the *raison d’être* for Husserl’s phenomenological approach was to reinstate the purely centred subject as the object of philosophical investigation, and although this determinism seems to run counter to the aim of this text, he was also guilty of diminishing the subject in his own manner and with major implications for succeeding theorists. His main objection to psychology, apart from its
scientific approach to the study of intangible unconscious subjectivity, was its apparently ‘objectivist’ approach, explaining in ‘The Crisis’ that:

[W]ith its claims to scientific exactitude [psychology] wants to be the universal fundamental science of the spirit. Still, our hope for real rationality, i.e., for real insight, is disappointed here as elsewhere. The psychologists simply fail to see that they too study neither themselves nor the scientists who are doing the investigating nor their own vital environing world. They do not see that from the very beginning they necessarily presuppose themselves as a group of men belonging to their own environing world and historical period. By the same token, they do not see that in pursuing their aims they are seeking a truth in itself, universally valid for everyone. By its objectivism psychology simply cannot make a study of the soul in its properly essential sense (1965:186-87).

Not only does Husserl criticise psychology for its supposedly objective ego-based approach to the study of the unconscious, he also hints at a more conventional approach that further decentres the individual. By indicating the importance of the ‘environing world’ — that which impacts on both the analyst and analysand — Husserl inadvertently proposes that this outside influence will vary from subject to subject, making a ‘universal truth’ an impossibility, yet this view was one born out of an innate humanism rather than any belief in an inherently diminished subject. Furthermore, his belief that psychology was failing in its pursuit, due to a confusion between the physical and ‘psychical,’ led him to propose that the study of consciousness was best afforded through the investigation of phenomena rather than experience.

Husserl’s motivation for his phenomenological approach was not based solely on the failure of psychology but also of the Hegelian legacy, and although influenced by Hegel’s work he believed that philosophy had suffered greatly as a result of his search for a deterministic understanding of the human subject, which included the unquestioned adoption of a variety of metaphysical concepts. As Quentin Lauer states in his ‘Introduction’ to Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy: “Though Hegel’s goal was unquestionably absolute knowledge, it is in his wake that scientific exigency in philosophy tends to weaken or to be given a false orientation. As a reaction to Hegel there arose a dissatisfaction with every known philosophy, which turned into a distrust
of philosophy as such and terminated in historical relativism” (1965:8-9). Thus, Husserl saw philosophy as suffering from a crisis of faith resulting from the lack of scientific certitude of metaphysical approaches, such as Hegel’s historicism, leaving them open to ridicule and scepticism, pointing out in ‘The Crisis’ that the: “course of philosophy goes through a period of naïveté. This, then, is the place for a critique of the so renowned irrationalism, or it is the place to uncover the naïveté of that rationalism that passes as genuine philosophical rationality […] the most general title for this naïveté is objectivism, which is given a structure in the various types of naturalism, wherein the spirit is naturalized” (1965:181). As such, Husserl viewed philosophy and psychology as having failed to deliver a promised scientific certitude of subjectivity, while naturalising consciousness through a flawed objectivist approach that — coupled with a loss of rationality and reason — had resulted in scepticism toward both.

It was Husserl’s belief that a rigorous scientific approach to the study of human consciousness would avert any further decline of theory and culture, viewing the complete understanding of conscious subjectivity as his ‘Archimedean point.’ He believed this could be achieved by moving from the intangible metaphysical postulations of philosophy, religion and psychoanalysis to the unquestionable phenomena of existence, explaining in ‘Philosophy as a Rigorous Science’ that the fight against scepticism was necessary for the future of European culture and subjectivity:

From its earliest beginnings philosophy has claimed to be a rigorous science. What is more, it has claimed to be the science that satisfies the loftiest theoretical needs and renders possible from an ethico-religious point of view a life regulated by pure rational norms. This claim has been pressed with sometimes more, sometimes less energy, but it has never been completely abandoned, not even during those times when interest in and capacity for pure theory were in danger of atrophying, or when religious forces restricted freedom of theoretical investigation (1965:71).

Thus, Husserl believed he was returning to the proper teleology of a rigorous scientific philosophy that had ‘atrophied’ as the result of the acceptance of *a priori* preconceptions, resulting in the loss of metaphysical certitude for the subject. He
posited that his phenomenological approach would address what he considered the subject’s inalienable right to metaphysical self-presence because: “philosophy, according to its historical purpose the loftiest and most rigorous of all sciences, representing as it does humanity’s imperishable demand for pure and absolute knowledge […] is incapable of assuming the form of a rigorous science” (72). Therefore, the only hope for the subject was with a scientifically rigorous phenomenology free of the sceptical metaphysical preconceptions plaguing his day.

With the failure of philosophy to achieve this certitude of subjectivity, Husserl proceeded to defamiliarise what he referred to as ‘degenerate metaphysics,’ with a process he referred to as ‘bracketing,’ thus bringing about an phenomenological _epoché_ — or cessation — of the unquestioned appropriation of the preconceptions of a supposedly objective psychology and philosophy. He explains this process in ‘Section 8’ of the _Cartesian Meditations_ wherein he argues that:

The universal depriving of acceptance, this ‘inhibiting’ or ‘putting out of play’ of all positions taken toward the already given Objective and, in the first place, all existential positions (those concerning being, illusion, possible being, being likely, probable etc.) — or, as the it is also called, this ‘phenomenological _epoché_’ and ‘parenthesizing’ of the Objective world — therefore does not leave us confronting nothing. On the contrary we gain possession of something by it; and what we […] acquire by it is my pure living, with all the pure subjective processes making this up, and everything meant in them, purely as meant in them: the universe of ‘phenomena’ in the (particular and also the wider) phenomenological sense. The _epoché_ can also be said to be the radical and universal method by which I apprehend myself _purely_ as Ego, and with my own pure conscious life, in and by which the entire Objective world exists for me and is precisely as it is for me (1973:20-21).

That is, despite his fundamentally metaphysical aim, Husserl was instrumental in diminishing the subject of traditional philosophy by defamiliarising it in a form of proto-deconstruction that would prove to be greatly influential. Yet despite criticising psychoanalysis and contemporary philosophy for their objectivist approaches, Husserlian phenomenology was at once grounded in science and claimed complete knowledge of the phenomena of the ‘environing world’ of the conscious subject. As such, Husserl sacrificed the individual in favour of a metaphysical ‘ideal being’ of
consciousness — thus continuing the primacy of the *cogito* — that was at once universal and scientifically provable, while at the same time diminishing the subject through his belief in a generic method for understanding *all* subjects. Therefore, he found himself consciously guilty of metaphysics due to a determined belief that the truth of the consciousness could be uncovered through a scientific study of phenomena, and that the rampant scepticism in the European subject would be cured.³

2.1.b. Husserl’s Doubts

Having outlined Husserl’s *modus operandi* for developing his phenomenological study of subjectivity, and the problems inherent therein, it is interesting to note that despite his scientific rigour he expressed constant doubts regarding the validity of his enterprise. In his ‘Introduction,’ Lauer points out that there are three distinct phases of Husserl’s phenomenology, those being the:

Husserl of the *Logische Untersuchungen*, where he so masterfully employed a phenomenological description of experience [...] the Husserl of *Ideen I*, as he turned the searchlight of his investigations more and more inward to the subject of this experience [while] in *Formale und transzendentale Logik* and the *Cartesian Meditations*, he made his idealism so thoroughly transcendental that not only the form but also the content of experience was constituted in subjectivity (1965:24).

That is, despite his best intentions Husserl was filled with doubts in much the same manner as Wittgenstein was with his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, causing him to continually develop and refine his approach, eventually leading him into an *aporia* — a theoretical *impasse* — that he could only escape with the proposal of the ‘transcendental ego.’ However, this move led him inexorably into the trap of metaphysics, the very locus of the crisis he wished to escape.

Husserl believed that the ‘bracketing’ brought about by the phenomenological *epoché* would not only overcome degenerate metaphysics, but also provide a purity of self-present subjectivity through a process of phenomenological reduction — explained in ‘Section 8’ of *The Cartesian Mediations* — and argued that: “this phenomenon itself,
as mine, is not nothing but is precisely what makes such critical decisions at all possible and accordingly makes possible what ever has for me sense and validity as ‘true’ being — definitely decided or definitely decidable being” (1973:19). It was his belief that the seat of this ‘true’ being — the ‘Archimedean point’ of subjectivity — would be uncovered by this reduction, and was located in the ‘transcendental ego,’ explaining in ‘Section 11’ of The Meditations that:

By phenomenological epoché I reduce my natural human Ego and my psychic life — the realm of my psychological self-experience — to my transcendental-phenomenological Ego, the realm of transcendental-phenomenological self-experience. The Objective world, the world that exists for me, that always has and always will exist for me, the only world that can ever exist for me — this world, with all its Objects, I said, derives its whole sense, and its existential status, which it has for me, from me myself, from me as the transcendental Ego, the Ego who comes to the fore only with the transcendental-phenomenological epoché (1973:26).

Ironically, while Husserl began by refuting the metaphysical approaches of philosophy and psychology, he too became guilty of metaphysical determinism when creating his own neologism of the ‘transcendental ego.’ However, despite the inherent problems of this intangible concept, his process of bracketing seemingly a priori philosophical concepts proved to be greatly influential, and despite his failings, the manner in which he dealt with this impasse was to provide a useful theoretical springboard for the likes of Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida. Safranski indicates the extent that Husserl’s approach to the study of subjectivity eventually ran counter to his initial propositions: “With his own thoughts […] he would forever start afresh; he found it difficult to accept as valid what he had written earlier. Consciousness, especially his own, was to him a river into which, as is known, one cannot ever step twice at the same point” (1999:73-4). In other words, despite his best intentions, Husserl saw himself as a ‘perpetual beginner’ in the study of consciousness, and raised doubts that led him to constantly undermine his scientific propositions and literally destroy his own work. Thus, even though he attempted to reinstate self-present certitude and complete understanding of
consciousness with the transcendental ego, we can view his *aporia* as supporting an *a priori* perspective of subjectivity as ineluctably diminished and not transcendental.

2.1.c. Husserl and language

It is interesting to note that although Husserl attempted to address the problematic division of language originating with Plato’s ‘wrong turn’ — that schism between the reason of rhetoric and the speciousness of the poetic — in order to establish the logical base of his phenomenological approach, in doing so he further diminished the traditional view of the self-present subject. He explains the need for a logical definition of language in ‘Section 5’ of the ‘First Investigation’ of *The Logical Investigations* stating that: “From indicative signs we distinguish meaningful signs, i.e., expressions. We thereby employ the term ‘expression’ restrictively: we exclude much that ordinary speech would call an ‘expression’ from its range of application. There are other cases in which we have thus to do violence to usage, where concepts for which only ambiguous terms can exist call for a fixed terminology” (1999:28). That is, in order to establish a logical approach to the study of the phenomena of consciousness, vague arbitrary terms such as ‘expression’ needed to be ‘bracketed’ and set in concrete terms. The ‘violence’ Husserl extends toward the definition of ‘expression’ indicates a deterministic perspective of what he believed could be classified communication, and emphasises once again his fundamental metaphysical aim:

We shall lay down, for provisional intelligibility, that each instance or part of speech, as also each sign that is essentially the same sort, shall count as an expression, whether or not such speech is actually uttered, or addressed with communicative intent to any persons or not. Such a definition excludes facial expressions and the various gestures which involuntarily accompany speech without communicative intent, or those in which a man’s mental states achieve understandable ‘expression’ for his environment, without the added help of speech. Such ‘utterances’ are not expressions in the sense in which a case of speech is an expression, they are not phenomenally one with the experiences made manifest in them in the consciousness of man who manifests them, as in the case of speech. In such manifestations one man communicates nothing to another: their utterance involves no intent to put certain ‘thoughts’ on record expressively, whether for the man himself, in his solitary state, or for others. Such ‘expressions’ in short, have properly speaking, no meaning. It is
not to the point that another person may interpret our involuntary manifestations, e.g., our ‘expressive moments,’ and that he may thereby become deeply acquainted with our inner thoughts and emotions. They ‘mean’ something to him in so far as he interprets them, but even for him they are without meaning in the special sense in which verbal signs have meaning: they only mean in the sense of indicating (1999:28).

Therefore, we see Husserl continuing, and complicating, the divisive dualism of the ‘wrong turn’ while indicating his own determinism, when suggesting that these non-verbal and unconscious forms of involuntary communication have no value in his logical investigation. However, by recognising and dismissing the existence of these non-conscious expressions of subjectivity, Husserl inadvertently acknowledges the danger that communicative articulation has for the self-present subject, by implicating the Other in the reception of these unintentional ‘utterances.’ Faced with a form of expression which stems from the unconscious, and having turned his back on psychological preconceptions, Husserl determined that such phenomena have no value for the investigation into pure consciousness and, much like Plato, banishes them, and their receiver — the dangerous Other — from his phenomenological investigation into the pure ‘expression’ of self-presence.

Husserl’s deliberate omission of non-verbal and unconscious expression from his definition of ‘indication’ is explained by Jacques Derrida in ‘Meaning as Soliloquy,’ wherein he states that: “The move which justifies this exclusion should teach us a great deal about the metaphysical tenor of this phenomenology” (1996:37), and goes on to intimate the dangers these forms of expression hold for Husserl’s metaphysics of self-presence, explaining that:

The themes which will arise therein will never be re-examined by Husserl; on the contrary, they will repeatedly be confirmed. This will lead us to think that in the final analysis what separates expression from indication could be called the immediate nonself-presence of the living present. The elements of worldly experience, of what is natural or empirical, of sensibility, of association, etc., which determined the concept of indication will perhaps […] find their ultimate unity in this non-presence. And this non-presence to itself of the living present will simultaneously qualify the relation to others in general as well as the relation to the self involved in temporalization (37).
Perhaps this tendency is a prime example of someone protesting too much against a perceived *aporia* in their work, and is Husserl’s response to a threat to his ‘Archimedean Point.’ This possibility is not lost on Derrida who explains that the division between verbal and non-verbal communication is also a continuation of the dualism of the Cartesian *cogito* arguing that: “The opposition between body and soul is not only at the centre of this doctrine of signification, it is confirmed by it; and, as has always been at bottom the case in philosophy, it depends upon the interpretation of language. Visibility and spatiality as such could only destroy the self-presence of will and spiritual animation which opens up discourse. *They are literally the death of that self-presence*” (35). That Husserl’s investigations into language should raise more questions than answers — due mainly to this inadequate engagement with language — could be in part due to the recognition that all forms of self-expression necessarily undermine the possibility of pure presence.

While Husserl’s logically deterministic approach to language attempted to cure the crisis of scepticism by ‘bracketing’ non-verbal and unconscious expressions, he failed to recognise the metaphysically linguistic nature of all philosophical concepts. Derrida explains this problem when he asks: “What gives a theory of knowledge the authority to determine the essence and origin of language? We do not impute such a decision to Husserl; he explicitly assumes it — or rather he explicitly assumes its tradition and its validity […] Husserl had to postpone, from one end of his itinerary to the other, all explicit meditation on the essence of language *in general* […] and the language of phenomenology is never broken in spite of the precautions, the ‘brackets,’ the renovations or innovations” (7-8). As we shall see, not only did this unquestioning use of the philosophical tradition and the *a priori* nature of indicative expressions underline the fundamental metaphysical aim of Husserl’s phenomenology, it was to have a marked impact on the work of Martin Heidegger.
2.1.d. The Husserlian Now — Presence and Changeability

Although having focussed primarily on Husserl as divided between a faith in the certitude of science and doubts over his phenomenological enterprise, the changeability of his theoretical position is also important to this discussion of the diminished subject, while his investigation of consciousness in relation to both language and time, have had implications for the continued study of subjectivity. In *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*, Husserl explains that in order for consciousness to progress with the passage of time there must be a transition between a past consciousness and a new ‘now-consciousness’ while maintaining self-presence:

> It is a universal and basically essential fact that every now as it sinks in the past maintains its strict identity. Phenomenologically speaking, the now-consciousness that is constituted on the basis of a content A changes continuously to a consciousness of the past, while at the same time an ever new now-consciousness is built up. With this transformation [...] the self-modifying consciousness preserves its object intention (1966:86).

However, while trying to provide a perspective of the transition of consciousness through time, Husserl inadvertently undermines his phenomenological approach, and the possibility of self-present subjectivity. This becomes clear when he explains the manner in which consciousness transcends the present moment: “The now, just sinking away, is no longer the new, but that which is shoved aside by the new. In this being-shoved aside lies an alteration. But while the now which has been shoved aside has lost its now-character, it maintains itself in its object intention absolutely unaltered” (86-7).

Thus, for Husserl, the new ‘now-consciousness’ must at once undergo an alteration and maintain its intention. Furthermore, the fact that every new ‘now-consciousness’ must be open to new phenomena presupposes that consciousness, rather than being self-present to the subject and fixed in time, it is constantly changing.

This dichotomy has been picked up on by many including Christopher Norris\(^6\) and Horst Ruthrof,\(^7\) and has had major implications for the work of Heidegger and Derrida.
However, most pertinently it was Husserl who best undermined his own attempts at a scientific understanding of consciousness and, in turn, the belief in the possibility of pure self-presence, something that becomes clear when he explains that:

In any ideal sense, then, perception (impression) would be the phase of consciousness, which constitutes the pure now, and memory of every other phase of the continuity. But this is just an ideal limit, something abstract, which can be nothing for itself. Moreover, it is also true that even the ideal now is not something toto caelo different for the not-now but continually accommodates itself thereto. The continual transition from perception to primary remembrance conforms to the accommodation (63).

Thus it follows that if every possible new now-consciousness is both an ‘ideal limit’ and ‘abstract’ then there can be no way of knowing what that new now-consciousness will be, especially given that any new phenomena denies pre-given perception. That is, while trying to apply a purely phenomenological explanation to consciousness, Husserl undermines his own proposition in relation to language and time arguing that any moment of self-presence is fleeting and problematic. Derrida argues this point in ‘Meaning and Representation,’ stating that: “The self-presence of experience must be produced in the present taken as a now. And this is just what Husserl says: if ‘mental acts’ are not announced to themselves through the intermediary of a ‘Kundgabe,’ if they do not have to be informed about themselves through the intermediary of indications, it is because they are ‘lived by us in the same instant.’ The present of self-presence would be as indivisible as the blink of an eye” (1973:59). Thus, with his dismissal of inappropriate forms of expression, the relation between the subject and the other, and the effect that the passage of time has on any new now-consciousness, we see Husserl’s ‘Archimedean Point’ of self-present subjectivity literally thrown out with the bathwater!

Finally then, we can see that Husserl’s work in relation to self-present subjectivity makes for an interesting dichotomy. On the one hand he attempted to carry out a complete understanding of consciousness in scientific terms to overcome the scepticism of speculative metaphysics, while on the other he exhibited self-doubt as to the validity
of this approach, which led him to consistently rewrite and undermine his work. The extent of Husserl’s theoretical *aporia* and the success he had in defamiliarising metaphysical preconceptions by ‘bracketing’ them is best expressed by Martin Heidegger who states that: “I remained so fascinated by Husserl’s work that I read it time and time again in the years to follow without gaining sufficient insight into what fascinated me. The spell emanating from the work extended to the outer appearance of the sentence structure and the title page” (Quoted in Biemel:1977:10). That is, despite his failings, it was Husserl’s shortcomings that had a remarkable impact on successive theorists, while his apparent *aporia* clearly gives a perspective of an *a priori* diminishing of subjectivity. Although Husserl called for a phenomenological approach to the study of subjectivity free from degenerate metaphysics and purely self-present, he ultimately failed to cure the crises of European Man, yet despite this he never lost faith in the future of subjectivity. However, when writing in 1936 — a mere two years prior to his death and three years before WWII — he presciently indicated the possible outcome of a culture based on rampant scepticism, something that he was to experience first-hand in neo-Nietzschean Nazi Germany, explaining in ‘The Crisis’ that:

The crisis of European existence can end in only one of two ways: in the ruin of a Europe alienated from its rational sense of life, fallen into a barbarian hatred of spirit; or in the rebirth of Europe from the spirit of philosophy, through a heroism of reason that will definitively overcome naturalism. Europe’s greatest danger is its weariness. Let us as ‘good Europeans’ do battle with this danger of dangers with the sort of courage that does not shirk with even the endless battle. If we do, then from the annihilating conflagration of disbelief, from the fiery torrent of despair regarding the West’s mission to humanity, from the ashes of the great weariness, the phoenix of a new inner life of the spirit will arise as the underpinning of a great and distant human future, for the spirit alone is immortal (1965:192).

Therefore, with this discussion of Husserl we see a theorist split between a pessimism that is predicative of the new crisis about to engulf Europe and the ‘endless’ desire for the metaphysical comfort of self-presence, while remaining mystically optimistic that phenomenology could determine the certitude of subjectivity and culture he craved for. Finally then, Husserl can be read as a divided theorist whose work parallels the
fundamental theoretical premise of the *aporia* of the diminished subject, and whose influence, as we shall see, has had a significant impact on contemporary perspectives of philosophy, language and subjectivity.

2.2.a. Martin Heidegger — Phenomenology, Language and ‘Deconstruction’

Having discussed the importance of Edmund Husserl to this thesis I will now turn my attention to the work of Martin Heidegger, which despite having had a great influence on contemporary theory is mostly ignored or simply glossed over. It is my contestation, that this apparent lack of interest stems from the difficult nature of his writing — infamous for its neologisms and word play, most of which are lost in translation — and due his involvement with the Nazi party. It is with this in mind that I shall begin this section, yet rather than summarising Heidegger’s extensive body of work, I shall focus on three aspects, those being his close personal and theoretical ties with Husserl, the manner in which *Being and Time* — his *magnum opus* — continues the teleology of the diminished subject, and the increased focus on the literary in his ‘mature’ work. However, as any discussion of Heidegger must necessarily engage with his involvement with Nazism, rather than simply adding to this weighty topic, I shall keep my discussion of this issue as pertinent to the topic of this thesis as possible.

2.2.b. Heidegger and Husserl — The link and the break

Is it the fault of being that it is so involved? Is it the fault of the word that it remains so empty? Or are we to blame that with all our effort, with all our chasing after the *essent*, we have fallen out of being? And should we not say that the fault did not begin with us, or with our immediate or more remote ancestors, but lies in something that runs through Western History from the very beginning, a happening which the eyes of all the historians in the world will never perceive, but which nevertheless happens, which happened in the past and will happen in the future? What if it were possible that man, that nations in their greatest movements and traditions, are linked to being, and yet had long fallen out of being, without knowing it, and that this was the most powerful and most central cause of their decline?

It is interesting to note that despite the commonly held belief that the contemporary subject is suffering from a ‘postmodern condition,’ the issue of a crisis in culture and subjectivity recurs once again in the work of Martin Heidegger — although its nature was to alter between the First and the Second World Wars — giving the perception that this state of crisis is continual rather than something temporally specific. That Heidegger’s theoretical impetus was as a response to certain cultural and philosophical crises is explained by Thomas Sheehan, in his article ‘Reading a life: Heidegger and hard times,’ wherein he states that:

Even Heidegger, when he was 20 years old and still a seminary student, had thrown in his lot with the Vatican [and] publicly condemned Modernism and defended the church’s teaching authority […] Four years later, however […] Heidegger began to feel the pinch of the church’s anti-Modernist crusade and changed his mind. In a letter to his friend Father Krebs […] he remarked ironically how the Vatican might guarantee conformity among Catholic intellectuals: ‘Philosophical demand could be met by setting up vending machines in the train station (free of charge for the poor)’ and ‘all who succumb to having independent thoughts could have their brains taken out and replaced with spaghetti’ (1993:74).

Having decided to enter the seminary, it follows that the young Heidegger would abide by the Church’s doctrines and reject the liberal philosophical and artistic endeavours of Modernism. However, in a case of crisis begetting crisis, Heidegger soon turned his back on the church, and in an abrupt volte-face embraced the apparent philosophical freedom of Modernism. This temporally specific fear of Modernism cannot be ignored, especially given that recent perspectives of the crisis of postmodernism, such as Fredric Jameson’s — those which argue for a return to the cultural originality of the Modernist era — can now be perceived as a neo-‘shock of the neo,’ and comparable to this response by the Catholic Church to decadent Modernism.

For Heidegger, this crisis of religious faith eventually led him to convert to Protestantism, yet this was little when compared with the impending horrors of WWI. Unable to enlist at the outbreak of hostilities, he continued his studies at Freiburg University under Edmund Husserl before being called up for home defence duties in
early 1918. Following the armistice and the reparations of the Treaty of Versailles, Germany’s economy and culture were suffering from unprecedented crises\textsuperscript{8} that would have a major influence on his work. This is especially true of \textit{Being and Time}, given that many of its key themes — such as the innate anxiety of Being — are the direct response to the crises of culture and philosophy. Rudiger Safranski points out the extent of the chaos in post-war Germany in \textit{Martin Heidegger, Between Good and Evil}:

Heidegger’s philosophy of anxiety also stems from the general crisis mood of the 1920s. The malaise of culture […] was widespread. The worldview essays of the period were marked by an uneasy sense of a declining, perverted, or alienated world. The diagnoses were gloomy and the therapies offered numerous. A boom was enjoyed by attempts to cure the ailing whole from one point […] fanatical anti-Semitism and racial ideas were rampant, the Bolshevization of the German Communist Party was beginning, Hitler was writing \textit{Mein Kampf} in Landsberg prison, millions were seeking salvation in sectarian movements — occultism, vegetarianism, nudism, theosophy and anthroposophy — there were countless promises of salvation and offers of a new road (1999:152-3).

With this view, it appears that Heidegger’s early work was a response to a perceived crisis of culture and philosophy, and an attempt to reinstate analytical rigour and overcome the failure of religious metaphysics, Modernism, and the myriad of dubious cure-alls, to provide any solutions to an inherent anxiety and insecurity of subjectivity. Much of this cultural chaos had been exacerbated by the war, and what was to follow in Nazi Germany had its roots here leading to crises beyond imagination, while Heidegger was himself dealing with the failure of Husserl to theoretically deal with these issues.

Although Husserl was Heidegger’s academic mentor at Freiburg University, by 1919 he had begun to question his phenomenological approach, and began to distance himself from both the man and his theories. He took especial exception to Husserl’s reliance on the metaphysical ‘transcendental ego’ to escape his phenomenological aporia, and as Sheehan explains, began to openly express these feelings: “[I]n one of the Saturday morning discussions that Husserl used to hold at his Freiburg home with his close associates, Heidegger told Husserl publicly that the much vaunted pure ego of Husserlian phenomenology was ‘derived’ from the historical ego by the ‘repression’ of
historicity and concretion, and that the pure ego was limited to the role of being the ‘subject’ only of ‘theoretical acts’” (1993:80). It is clear that several years before beginning *Being and Time* Heidegger was already drifting away from Husserl’s metaphysical phenomenology, and returning to the analysis of knowable phenomena, which gave rise to his notion of *Dasein*.9

By the time Heidegger had completed *Being and Time*, he had distanced himself even further, to the point that when discussing ‘Being-in-the-world’ he felt confident enough to indirectly criticise Husserl when explaining that Being’s philosophical lack of clarity: “is not rooted primarily and solely in ‘egocentric’ self deceptions; it is rooted just as much in a lack of acquaintance with the world” (1967:187). That is, rather than relying on the ‘transcendental ego’ to get to the heart of Being as Husserl ego-centrically did, Heidegger made *Dasein* his focus, believing that the understanding of the interaction between Being and such worldly phenomena as language and time, would bring clarity to this opaqueness. Heidegger explained this further in *The Basic Problem of Phenomenology*, wherein he argued that:

> For Husserl the phenomenological reduction, which he worked out for the first time expressly in the *Ideas Towards A Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy* (1913), is the method of leading phenomenological vision from the natural attitude of the human being whose life is involved in the world of things and persons back to the transcendental life of consciousness and its noetic-noematic experiences, in which objects are constituted as correlates of consciousness. For us phenomenological reduction means leading phenomenological vision back from the apprehension of a being, whatever may be the character of that apprehension, to the understanding of the being of this being (1982:21).

For Heidegger then, Husserl’s transcendental ego would be his starting point, believing that his own anti-metaphysical approach to *Dasein* would address these philosophical problems. Apart from rejecting Husserl’s metaphysical phenomenology, Heidegger also questioned his *a priori* adoption of the ontological tradition of philosophical thought, defamiliarised being by locating *Dasein* ‘in-the-world’ — rather than as present-at-hand — and coined his own neologisms rather than appropriating those of metaphysics.10
However, Heidegger did not stop there, and in *Being and Time* turned on Descartes’ *cogito*, stating that: “In the course of history certain distinctive domains of Being have come into view and have served as the primary guides for the subsequent problematics; the *ego cogito* of Descartes, the subject, the ‘I,’ reason, spirit, person. But these all remain uninterrogated as to their Being and its structure, in accordance with the thoroughgoing way in which the question of Being has been neglected” (1967:44). And it is this desire to question the *a priori* nature of the metaphysical Being that makes Heidegger important to this thesis, influential to contemporary subjectivity, and problematic to many.

Although Heidegger was keen to question the ontology of metaphysics, and despite efforts to distance himself with such concepts as *Dasein*, he was also aware of the impossibility of making a complete break with this tradition. In *The Basic Problem of Phenomenology*, he explains this while continuing to question several key figures that were influential in establishing this ontology:

Even the ontological investigation which we are now conducting is determined by its historical situation and, therewith, by certain possibilities of approaching beings and by the preceding philosophical tradition. The store of basic philosophical concepts derived from the philosophical tradition is still so influential today that this effect of tradition can hardly be overestimated (1982:22).

That is, rather than being unwittingly caught in the *aporia* of metaphysics, for Heidegger a complete break with the ontological tradition would in itself be a metaphysical act, and he began questioning these *a priori* concepts in order to defamiliarise them. As Stephen Mulhall points out in his study *Heidegger and Being and Time*: “Our questioning of the meaning of Being must begin within the horizon of a vague, average understanding of Being; for we cannot ask ‘What is ‘Being’?’ without making use of the very term at issue. There is, accordingly, no neutral perspective from which we might begin our questioning; the idea of a presuppositionless starting point, even for an exercise in fundamental ontology, must be rejected as an illusion”
By questioning the ontology of the metaphysical tradition, Heidegger diminishes the primacy of Being and the self-present subject, a move that would have a marked impact on contemporary theory and the metaphysics of presence.\(^\text{12}\)

In order to pursue his anti-metaphysical aims Heidegger coined three neologisms — reduction, construction and destruction — that would make up the component parts of his phenomenological approach, explaining in *The Basic Problem of Phenomenology* that: “Construction in philosophy is necessarily destruction, that is to say, a deconstructing of traditional concepts carried out in a historical recursion to the tradition. And this is not a negation of the tradition or a condemnation of it as worthless; quite the reverse, it signifies precisely a positive appropriation of tradition” (1982:23). As such, for Heidegger, the ‘de-construction’ of the philosophical tradition is necessarily empowering as it defamiliarises the seemingly *a priori* concepts pertaining to Being. However, as we shall see, his ‘deconstruction’ of the ontology of Western philosophy was not viewed positively, especially when it meant the end of the unquestioned primacy of the self-presence of Being.

Before I begin my discussion of the diminished subject in *Being and Time*, I will finish this section by discussing Heidegger’s involvement with the Nazi party, and the impact this would have on his relationship with Husserl. Apart from Heidegger’s theoretical rejection of Husserl’s metaphysical phenomenology, by joining the Nazi party in 1933\(^\text{13}\) he exacted the ultimate personal betrayal of his Jewish born friend. Safranski indicates the growing personal divide between the two when Husserl’s position as Rector of Freiburg University was endangered with the implementation of a decree that prohibited any Jew employed since 1918 from working in the Civil Service:

Reich Commissioner Robert Wagner [issued a decree] providing for the provisional suspension, with the aim of eventual dismissal, of all Jewish officials [and] Husserl was given an enforced leave of absence on April 14, 1933. At that time Heidegger was not yet in office. When Wagner’s decree was rescinded in favor of the Law on the Reestablishment […] Husserl’s mandatory leave had to be revoked. This was the task of the newly elected rector […] Husserl had felt his leave to be the ‘supreme
affront’ of his life […] In a letter of May 4, 1933, to his pupil Dietrich Mahnke, he calls Heidegger’s ‘very theatrical’ entry into the Nazi Party ‘the perfect ending to this supposed bosom friendship between philosophers.’ This had been accompanied over the few preceding years by Heidegger’s increasingly patent anti-Semitism, including toward his group of enthusiastic Jewish pupils and faculty colleagues (1999:253-54).

Husserl’s anger was understandable given that by the time he returned from his enforced leave, Heidegger had not only become member of the Nazi party, but had also replaced him as Rector. At a time of increased crisis — with war looming and the persecution of the Jews commencing — it seems ironic that Heidegger, who so strongly railed against the crises of philosophy and culture, should embrace a political dictatorship that ostracised his friend and mentor, especially given that both had converted to Protestantism. That a seemingly progressive individual should embrace a political doctrine that would drastically affected the Dasein of such a large section of the European community indicates the lure this nationalist fervour had in depression-ridden Germany, although it is also possible that this move was simply a flawed manifestation of Heidegger’s own philosophical position.

A further irony in the souring of the relationship between Husserl and Heidegger, and the impact of the Nazi party on German culture can be seen with the removal of Heidegger’s dedication to Husserl from Being and Time. In 1962 he retrospectively made reference to this event as a note to ‘A Dialogue on Language’ wherein he stated:

In 1941, when my publisher felt that the fifth edition might be endangered and that, indeed the book might be suppressed, it was finally agreed […] that this dedication be omitted from the edition, on the condition imposed by me that the note to page 38 be retained — a note which in fact states the reason for that dedication, and which runs: ‘If the following investigation has taken any steps forward in disclosing the ‘things themselves,’ the author must first of all thank E. Husserl, who, by providing his own incisive personal guidance and by freely turning over his unpublished investigations, familiarized the author with the most diverse areas of phenomenological research during his student years in Freiburg’ (1982:200).

Perhaps this is a case of historical revisionism whereby Heidegger’s retrospective awareness of the difficulties inherent in dealing with the dictates of a totalitarian political doctrine, caused him to justify his treatment of Husserl. Nevertheless by
joining the Nazi party he betrayed not only Husserl but also millions of others, including such contemporary figures as Walter Benjamin. However, Heidegger’s initial dedication of *Being and Time* to Husserl cannot be trivialised, yet to treat him so poorly and to remove this mark of respect for fear of the Nazi party seems unlikely. Perhaps that this friendship between like-minded thinkers ended as it did, may yet have something important to say about Being-in-the-world?

2.2.c. Being and Time — The Early Heidegger and the Kehre

If the question of Being is to have its own history made transparent, then this hardened tradition must be loosened up, and the concealments which it has brought about must be dissolved. We understand this task as one in which by taking the question of Being as our clue, we are to destroy the traditional content of ancient ontology until we arrive at those primordial experiences in which we achieved our first ways of determining the nature of Being — the ways which have guided us ever since.


Heidegger’s break with both the metaphysics of the Catholic Church and Husserl’s ‘transcendental ego’ have had major implications for the self-present individual, for although attempting to overcome the perceived crises of philosophy, subjectivity and culture, he was also guilty of further diminishing the subject. As Safranski explains: “The easiest way of escaping from the malaise of the physics of life was just this ‘meta’ of a speculative overall interpretation. Martin Heidegger shudders with disgust; he begins virtually every lecture in those early years with a diatribe against the cultural scene, and he keeps emphasizing that philosophy must, at long last, give up its covetous glances towards heaven” (1999:98-99). While attempting to find the truth of *Dasein*, Heidegger not only undermined the supposedly *a priori* nature of metaphysics, by locating Being-in-the-world he diminished it further by ‘unconcealing’ *Dasein’s* interaction with the phenomena of the ‘environing world.’

Despite its complex nature *Being and Time* is a rewarding text that clearly articulates Heidegger’s awareness of his inability to make a complete break with the
inherited conceptual ontology of metaphysics, and the problems associated with Being-in-the-world. He believed that the unconcealment of Being could be achieved only through the analysis of knowable phenomena, and by defamiliarising its apparent *a priori* nature and the concepts used to describe it. Aware of Plato’s ‘wrong-turn’ and his own complicity in the hermeneutic circle, Heidegger set about the ‘destruktion’ of Being in a new and exciting manner, and armed with neologisms such as *Dasein* he hoped to reveal the truth of Being. However, so sure was he of his approach that he immediately entered into metaphysics and then, just as quickly, exited it again.

Early in *Being and Time*, Heidegger, states that: “whenever Dasein tacitly understands and interprets something like Being, it does so with *time* as its standpoint. Time must be brought to light — and genuinely conceived — as the horizon of all understanding of Being and for any way of interpreting it. In order to discern this, *time* needs to be *explicated primordially as the horizon for the understanding of Being, and in terms of temporality as the Being of Dasein, which understands Being*” (1967:39). However, on the very next page he contradicts this deterministic statement indicating that: “our treatment of the question of the meaning Being must enable us to show that the central problematic of all ontology is rooted in the phenomenon of time, if rightly seen and rightly explained, and we must show how this is the case” (40). That is, Heidegger begins by positing an answer to the fundamental nature of Being and then immediately deconstructs that metaphysical certainty. He begins with a proposition, and extrapolates this idea working backwards until he arrives at his question, making *Being and Time* something akin to a stream of consciousness in reverse that explores the ultimate question of Being rather than providing the ultimate answer. However, I shall leave Heidegger’s apparent *aporia* for now and turn to the manner in which *Being and Time* diminishes the subject through its focus on time, death and language.
Rather than going into a lengthy analysis of Heidegger’s discussion of time, I shall instead uncover the contradictions within his argument, for although he appears to believe ‘concretely’ that an understanding of time would provide the truth of *Dasein*, he expresses doubts over this metaphysical determinism. Toward the end of *Being and Time* this contradiction reappears as a seemingly self-analytical *aporia* that was to have massive implications for the theoretical study of contemporary subjectivity, with his proposal of the momentary nature of presence being the key. The traditional ontology of philosophical thought had regarded Being as present-at-hand and existing outside of time, yet by locating Being-in-the-world it becomes susceptible to temporality thus undermining the metaphysics of presence. If, as Heidegger suggests, *Dasein* is constituted through its relationship with time, and that phenomenology will unconceal this truth, then it follows that self-presence must be able to maintain itself despite shifting temporally. Heidegger attempts to explain how, despite the unavoidable passing of time, self-presence can be maintained stating that:

Understanding is grounded primarily in the future (whether in anticipation or in awaiting). States-of-mind temporalize themselves primarily in having been (whether in repetition or in having forgotten). Falling has its temporal roots primarily in the Present (whether in making-present or in the moment of vision). All the same, understanding is in every case a Present which ‘is in the process of having been.’ All the same, one’s state-of-mind temporalizes itself as a future which is ‘making present.’ And all the same, the Present ‘leaps away’ from a future that is in the process of having been, or else it is held on to by such a future (401).

Despite his clever use of repetition and metre to mimic the passing of time, therein lies a contradiction, for although the ‘Present’ ‘leaps away,’ the past is held on to and self-presence is maintained into the future. By located Being-in-the-world with time as its locus, Heidegger struggles to come to terms with a patent yet intangible phenomenon, for time, coupled with various ‘Other’ aspects of the environing world, necessarily undermines the possibility of self-presence and the ‘concrete’ truth of Being.

Richard Polt expands on the difficulties of discussing Being in relation to time explaining that: “It runs out, then, that the meaning of Being is unclear, […] that in
order to think about Being, we have to think about temporality — for beings make a
difference to us not only when they are present in the present, but also when they are in
the past and future dimensions of the mysterious phenomenon called time” (1999:3).

Undaunted, Heidegger continues to explain how time can be overcome stating that:

The sequence of ‘nows’ is taken as something that is somehow present-at-hand, for it
even moves ‘into time.’ We say: ‘In every ‘now’ is now; in every ‘now’ it is already
vanishing.’ In every ‘now’ the ‘now’ is now and therefore it constantly has presence
as something selfsame, even though in every ‘now’ another may be vanishing as it
comes along. Yet as this thing which changes, it simultaneously shows its own
constant presence (1967:475).

What Heidegger appears to omit when theorising the possible ‘constant presence’ of
Being is that by locating Being-in-the-world he opens it up to the condition of the
possibility of change, and although I shall discuss his concept of ‘potentiality-of-Being’
later, it is the possible impact of the environing world on the subject which places self-
presence in danger. Not only is it impossible for Being to exist outside of time, it cannot
be denied its corporeal relationship with the world around it. Thus, Heidegger reached a
similar aporia to Husserl, as this constant flow of ‘nows’ make any potential presence
simply fleeting, merely momentary and fundamentally unstable.

Within Heidegger’s discussion of Being and Time, there exist insurmountable
contradictions that continue to diminish the self-present subject, for rather than
implicating time in the unconcealing of the truth of Being, Heidegger uses it to muddy
the waters further. In the final paragraph of Being and Time, he acknowledges the
aporia he has reached pointing out in no uncertain terms that: “The existential-
ontological constitution of Dasein’s totality is grounded in temporality. Hence the
eccstical projection of being must be made possible by some primordial way in which
eccstical temporality temporalizes” (488). However, with his tendency to repeatedly
question his position, he immediately undermines this certitude when in the very next
line he asks: “How is the mode of temporalizing of temporality to be Interpreted? Is
there a way which leads from the primordial time to the meaning of Being? Does time
itself manifest itself as the horizon of *Being*?” (488). Having set out with ‘concrete’ assertions regarding Being’s relationship to time, like Husserl before him he finishes by ‘de-constructing’ his own position by rhetorically questioning his aims. Interestingly enough, Heidegger did intend to complete a second volume wherein, we assume, he intended to answer the questions that end *Being and Time*. However, he soon became embroiled in the controversy surrounding his membership of the Nazi party, and when he did recommence writing, he began working instead on the expansion of §34 of *Being and Time*, entitled ‘Being-there and Discourse, Language.’

Apart from the importance of time in relation to Being and the impact on the previously unquestioned metaphysics of self-presence, Heidegger further undermines the primacy of the individual through his discussion of death, authentic Being and potentiality. These particular aspects of Being are intertwined and provide the best example of the inherent contradictions in the approach and structure of *Being and Time*. In many ways Heidegger’s constant questioning and inability to ascertain the truth of Being in time, imitate the perplexities of subjectivity, and it is with his discussion of death and potentiality that the inability of Being-in-the-world to attain and maintain self-presence becomes apparent.

For Heidegger, death brings about the end of Dasein, and with this awareness of the permanence of not-Being there comes a “freedom towards death” (311), and an anxiety that leads Being to live inauthentically. Furthermore, like the aporia of time, death is not only an inevitable aspect of existence, it is also ontical for although it exits as a phenomenon, it always remains metaphysical, for as he explains:

> If ‘death’ is defined as the ‘end’ of Dasein — that is to say, of Being-in-the-world — this does not imply any ontical decision whether ‘after death’ still another Being is possible, either higher or lower, or whether Dasein ‘lives on’ or even ‘outlasts’ itself and is ‘immortal.’ Nor is anything decided ontically about the ‘other-worldly’ and its possibility, any more than about the ‘this-worldly’ (292).
Although the anxiety of Being-towards-death is palpable it remains “a fantastical exaction” (311) which, like time is shrouded in mystery. Ironically, death at once brings about the ultimate diminishing of the self-present subject by bringing to a close the flow of present ‘nows,’ and becomes the true example of the individual act of subjective ‘mineness.’ Heidegger explains this position stating that: “Dying is something that every Dasein itself must take upon itself at the time. By its very essence, death is in every case mine, in so far as it ‘is’ at all. And indeed death signifies a peculiar possibility-of-Being in which the very Being of one’s own Dasein is an issue. In dying, it is shown that mineness and existence are ontologically constitutive for death” (284). That is, death is the ultimate possibility-of-Being, a truly individual act, but one that cannot be experienced consciously or necessarily repeated in order to be understood.

The realisation of the inevitability of Dasein’s end brings with it an anxiety that, according to Heidegger, and depending on how it is dealt with, results in authentic or inauthentic Being. For Heidegger, inauthentic Being is the result of anxiety and a desire to avoid death, and the possibility that any given moment of presence might be its last. He explains that: “Dasein’s fleeing in the face of that authentic existence which has been characterized as ‘anticipatory resoluteness,’ has made itself known; and it is this fleeing which is covered up. In this concernful fleeing lies a fleeing in the face of death — that is, a looking away from the end of Being-in-the-world” (476-7). Stephen Mulhall expands Heidegger’s position further stating that: “an authentic confrontation with death reveals death as an essentially thrown projection, its relation to its own Being at once holding open the possibility, and imposing the responsibility, of living a life that is both genuinely individual and genuinely whole — a life of integrity, of authenticity” (1996:120). That is, although death brings about the end of Dasein, Heidegger believed that the awareness of the finality of death could actually release Being from the torpor of denial, and result in a more authentic existence. Although this
concept seems to valorise certain ways of living, and is both metaphysical and
deterministic — ignoring the condition of the possibility of change inherent in Being-in-
the-world and its interaction with language and ‘the they’ — I would argue that
Heidegger was in fact referring to a renewed vigour for life born out of an awareness of
one’s own mortality, and can instead be viewed as empowering.17

Heidegger goes on to explain that although an acceptance of the inevitability of
Dasein’s death causes anxiety, it can also encourage the individual to explore their
potentiality-for-Being. It is through this exploration of potentiality that authentic Being
can be attained, although as we can see in the following passage from Being and Time,
the very nature of Being-possible further diminishes the subject:

The kind of Being which Dasein has, as potentiality-for-Being, lies existentially in
understanding. Dasein is not something present-at-hand which possesses its
competence for something by way of an extra; it is primarily Being-possible. Dasein
is in every case what it can be, and in the way in which it is possibility. The Being-
possible which is essential for Dasein, pertains to the ways of its solicitude for others
and for its concern for the ‘world,’ as we have characterized them; and in all these,
and always, it pertains to Dasein’s potentially-for-Being towards itself, for the sake
of itself. The Being-possible which Dasein is existentially in every case, is to be
sharply distinguished both from the contingency of something present-at-hand, so far
as with the present-at-hand this or that can come to pass. As a modal category of
present-at-hand, possibility signifies what is not yet actual and what is not at any
time necessary. It characterizes the merely possible (1967:183).

As such, the potentiality-for-Being and the Being-possible of Dasein, coupled with the
awareness of the lack of presence inherent with the possibility of change as represented
by death, and the momentary nature of any given self-present ‘now,’ leaves us with a
perspective of Being as perpetually in progress and never present-at-hand. That is, for
Heidegger, the potentiality-for-Being, may lead us to live more authentic lives, but it
will never be fully realised in a metaphysical sense, and thus the possibility of the
subject attaining and maintaining pure self-presence is fundamentally diminished.

As already indicated the importance of Being and Time comes with the constant
contradictions and uncertainties within, something that in many ways imitates the
changeable nature of subjectivity. That Heidegger ends his text where one would expect
it to begin indicates that rather than his ‘destruction’ uncovering the truth of Being, it ends with an *aporia*, something that appears to have prevented him completing Part Two, and represents a demarcation between the works of the ‘early’ and the ‘mature’ Heidegger — commonly referred to as the ‘turn’ or the *Kehre*. The importance of *Being and Time*, his theoretical *aporia*, and the neologism ‘destruction,’ can therefore be viewed positively, for as Richard Polt explains:

> After hundreds of pages, Heidegger sounds more tentative than he did at the start! The fact is that *Being and Time* is a fragment, a dead end, a ‘wood path’ that never makes it out of the woods. Heidegger will never show to his satisfaction that time is the horizon of Being. But some of us appreciate a good question at least as much as a good answer, and along the way to the dead end, there is so much to discover in the woods (1999:25).

With this in mind Heidegger’s work can be viewed as both empowering and nihilistic, for the final outcome of *Being and Time* is the denial of the metaphysics of presence through a process of defamiliarisation which deconstructs this seemingly *a priori* perspective of Being, leaving it naked and alone ‘in-the-world’ without the comfort blanket of self-presence.

Although Heidegger’s theoretical conception of ‘destruktion’ was (in)famously reformulated by Derrida as deconstruction, it is important to acknowledge this precedent. Furthermore, it is equally important to note that despite his failure, Heidegger had every intention of, and succeeded in, defamiliarising Being in a dramatic fashion, as we can see when he states that:

> Dasein’s kind of Being thus *demands* that any ontological interpretation which sets itself the goal of exhibiting the phenomena in their primordiality, *should capture the Being of this entity, in spite of this entity’s own tendency to cover things up*.

> Existential analysis, therefore, constantly has the character of *doing violence* […] whether to the claims of the everyday interpretation, or to its complacency and its tranquilized obviousness (1967:359).

That is, without arriving at the true horizon of Being, the ‘violence’ Heidegger’s phenomenological ‘destruction’ performed raised *Dasein* from this ‘tranquilized’ torpor, with ramifications not only for philosophy but also popular culture and religion that
clearly diminishes the self-present subject. Therefore, having concluded my discussion of *Being and Time* I shall now turn to Heidegger’s mature work, and how he continued to ‘deconstruct’ his *magnum opus* by investigating its failure. For as he presciently explains at the conclusion of *Being and Time* — and herein lies a message for us all — “This thesis, of course, is to be regarded not as a dogma, but rather as a formulation of a problem of principle which still remains ‘veiled’” (487). And it is to his continued attempts at this ‘unveiling,’ and increased focus on the literary, that I shall now turn.

2.2.d. Heidegger and the Literary — The Mature Heidegger

Before I begin my discussion of Heidegger’s mature work I shall firstly turn to §34 of *Being and Time*, wherein he questions the naïve use of language, the hermeneutic circle and Plato’s ‘wrong turn,’ all of which would provide impetus for his later works. When he located Being-in-the-world he undermined the metaphysics of the self-present subject, opening it up to the vagaries of the world of analysable phenomena. Furthermore, his focus on language had a lasting influence on subsequent philosophy and influenced, rightly or wrongly, the nihilism of certain postmodern theories of subjectivity. The way in which a mere seven pages of this weighty tome achieved this was to locate *Dasein* within language and discourse, and this mostly unacknowledged insight achieved Heidegger’s aim of deconstructing the metaphysics of Being far more successfully than any other aspect of *Being and Time*. While his extensive efforts to deconstruct and avoid using unquestioned metaphysical concepts saw him coining his own neologisms, we see in §34 the inherent problems of this approach, for when discussing the importance of discourse when attempting to understand *Dasein*, Heidegger explains that: “If discourse, as the Articulation of the intelligibility of the ‘there,’ is a primordial *existentiale* of disclosedness, and if disclosedness is primarily constituted by Being-in-the-world, then discourse too must have essentially a kind of Being which is specifically *worldly* — an intelligibility which goes with a state-of-mind
expresses itself as discourse” (204). That is, although Heidegger describes discourse and language as the ‘there’ of the ‘disclosedness’ of Being, and implies that the truth of Being can be uncovered through the analysis of its relationship to language, he did so without acknowledging the implicit problem of language’s inherently metaphysical and arbitrary nature.

Despite Heidegger’s metaphysical desire to ‘disclose’ the discursive nature of Dasein, his brief discussion of language in §34, not only acts as a turning point in his own work, it also supports a perspective of the philosophical validity of poetic and literary explorations of subjectivity. Although still caught up in metaphysics, he indicates that: “Being-in and its state-of-mind are made known in discourse and indicated in language by intonation, modulation, the tempo of talk, ‘the way of speaking.’ In ‘poetical’ discourse, the communication of the existential possibilities of one’s state-of-mind can become an aim in itself, and this amounts to a disclosing of existence” (205). That is, although he indicates that discourse can be used to ‘disclose’ Dasein, he also states that ‘poetical’ discourse can be used to uncover the possibilities of Dasein. This somewhat empowering and positive view of Dasein in relation to poetic language is of great importance to this thesis, becoming the foundation of Heidegger’s later work and eventually led him to state that ‘language is the house of Being.’

Before I begin my discussion of Heidegger and the literary, I shall investigate his acceptance of, and continued interest in, the inherent problems associated with his early discussion of language and Being. That the ‘mature’ Heidegger became aware of the importance of language in all discussions of Being — and his own complicity in metaphysics — can be seen no clearer than in his pseudo-literary stream of consciousness between J and I, entitled ‘A Dialogue on Language:’

J: Later, too, in Being and Time, your discussion of language remains quite sparse.
I: Even so, after our dialogue you may want to read Section 34 in Being and Time more closely.
J: I have read it many times, and each time regretted that you kept it so short. But I believe that now I see more clearly the full import of the fact that hermeneutics and language belong together.
I: The full import in what direction?
J: Toward a transformation of thinking — a transformation which, however, cannot be established as readily as a ship can alter its course, and even less can be established as the consequence of an accumulation of the results of philosophical research (1982:41-42).

We can see from this passage written in 1959, that Heidegger had not only become more playful in his writing style, he at once began acknowledging the importance of language, and his failure to make a break with metaphysics due to *a priori* trap of the hermeneutic circle. Even though the ‘early’ Heidegger set out to distance himself from the phenomenology of Husserl, and the metaphysical ontology of philosophical thought, here we see him admit the impossibility of avoiding the hermeneutics of language, and of making a complete break with the transcendental tradition of philosophy.²¹

The importance of the ontology of the philosophical tradition does not escape Heidegger who, later in the ‘Dialogue…’ explains that his approach in *Being and Time* was an attempt to defamiliarise rather than act as a complete break, stating that:

Nobody can in just one single leap take distance from the predominant circle of ideas, especially not if he is dealing with the well-worn tracks of traditional thinking — tracks that fade into realms where they can hardly be seen. Besides, taking such distance from all tradition is tempered by the very fact that the seemingly subversive will tries above all to recover the things of the past in a more originary form. It is this purpose that the first page of *Being and Time* speaks of ‘raising again’ a question. What is meant is not the monotonous trotting out of something that is always the same: to fetch, to gather in, to bring together what is concealed within the old (36).

That is, in a case of historical revisionism whereby the metaphysical aims of *Being and Time* are conveniently ignored, Heidegger argues that despite his awareness of the hermeneutic circle, the work undertaken therein does achieve his aim of ‘raising again’ the question of Being. Furthermore, in *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, he acknowledges the arbitrary and metaphysical nature of language and Being stating that: “To attach the crucial question of metaphysics to this empty word ‘being’ is to bring everything into confusion. Here then is only one possibility, to recognize the emptiness
of the word and to let it go at that. This we may now apparently do with a clear conscience; and all the more since the fact is explained historically by the history of language” (1987:76). Therefore, we see that by deconstructing Being, Heidegger draws attention to the metaphysical nature of language and undermines his own concept of Dasein, for if it was his aim to uncover the truth of Being by locating it in-the-world, then language, like time, further diminishes the self-present subject.

The impact of the literary turn on Heidegger’s ‘mature’ work was far reaching and the influence poetic language would have on the ‘unconcealment’ of Being — and his own writing style — was enormous. In ‘The Way to Language,’ he indicates the change his view of Being had undergone since Being and Time stating that:

The ability to speak is what marks man as man. This mark contains the design of his being. Man would not be man if it were denied him to speak unceasingly, from everywhere and every which way, in many variations, and to speak in terms of an ‘it is’ that most often remains unspoken. Language, in granting all this to man, is the foundation of the human being. We are, then, within language and with language before all else (1982:112).

If time was once the true ‘horizon’ of Being, then Heidegger — true to the changeable condition of both — shifted his theoretical focus to the relationship between Being and language. He goes on to expand on this interaction recycling his by now famous phrase when explaining that: “Language is the house of Being because language, as Saying, is the mode of Appropriation” (135). That is, we are forced to rely on an appropriated and arbitrary system of utterances to articulate Being, thus indicating its inherently metaphysical nature, while in ‘The Nature of Language’ he explains the importance of this relationship: “If it is true that man finds the proper abode of his existence in language — whether he is aware of it or not — then an experience we undergo with language will touch the innermost nexus of our existence” (1982:57). In other words, for Heidegger the analysis of language provides us with an understanding of Being as always already trapped within metaphysics and the hermeneutic circle.
The fundamental problems associated with the relationship between Being and language did not escape Heidegger, and led him to continually ‘de-construct’ his approach. In his ‘Dialogue on Language’ he reiterates the constraints of the hermeneutic circle — and the continued desire for the certitude of metaphysical concepts — when stating that: “those conceptualizations are not what I have in mind. Even the phrase ‘house of Being’ does not provide a concept of the nature of language, to the great sorrow of those philosophers who in their disgruntlement see in such phrases no more than a decay of thinking” (1982:22). With this view the chagrin that Heidegger felt toward certain negative responses of his discussion of the discursive nature of Being, and the limitations when appropriating the legitimate language of academic discourses, become apparent. This frustration manifests itself in Heidegger’s shift in focus to poetic language for the study of Being, something which had been ‘othered’ since Plato’s ‘wrong turn,’ explaining in The Basic Problem of Phenomenology that: “Poetry, creative literature, is nothing but the elementary emergence into words, the becoming-uncovered, of existence as being-in-the-world. For the others who before it were blind, the world first becomes visible by what is thus spoken” (1982:171-172). As such, for the ‘mature’ Heidegger, if the ‘unconcealment’ of Being carried out with the analysis of the interaction of language and Being has been thwarted by the ontology of the philosophical tradition, then he would turn to its traditional other.

Heidegger’s linguistic turn was not only reflected in his lengthy discussion of the poetry of Holderlin and the writing of Golding, but also in the style and form of his own texts. This is explained by Anderson and Freund in their ‘Translator’s Preface’ to Heidegger’s Discourse on Thinking, for when discussing the ‘Conversation…’ they indicate the extent that poetic language had infiltrated his work describing it as: “a refreshingly concrete presentation of one of the many fundamental points in his philosophy. The interplay of thought and argument, the free use of word and metaphor,
the poetic summaries, all offer a new perspective on an abstract argument, which should be of help in rounding out an awareness of the vision Heidegger has of the place of man in Being” (1966:8). That is, while he appears fixated on working outside of privileged parameters, he creates a ficto-critical work that succeeds on more levels than *Being and Time*, not simply because of its readability, but due to the ultimate defamiliarisation of Being carried out by the literary.\(^{22}\) Richard Polt expands on Heidegger’s increased focus on language and Being in relation to the poetic, explaining that:

Perhaps when Heidegger says that language is the house of Being, he means it ‘literally’: Being abides in language as its abode. There may be no prosaic way of saying this well, because ordinary prose is just poetry that has lost its disclosive force. What makes poetry poetry is not that it uses special poetic techniques, but that it recaptures the illuminating power that secretly resides in our ordinary words, letting us see the world as if for the first time (1999:177).

And it is this illuminating power which is of the greatest importance to this thesis, for not only does Heidegger diminish the subject in a variety of ways, having done this — and incurring the wrath of a raft of theorist — he re-empowers the individual by positing that not only is language ‘the house of being,’ but that this being need not be deterministically constrained. He locates the seat of the possible ‘releasement’ of being in the literary and the poetic, explaining in the ‘Memorial Address’ that: “If releasement towards things and openness to the mystery awaken within us, then we should arrive at a path that will lead creatively to a new ground and foundation. In that ground the creativity which produces lasting works could strike new roots” (1966:56-7). That is, through both literary and poetic works a process of ‘releasement’ defamiliarises the supposed *a priori* nature of Being and the role of the individual in society, and interestingly, this positive view of Being patently runs counter to the many, and varied, negative perspectives levelled at both Heidegger’s *oeuvre* and his life.

Finally then, it appears that the tendency to overlook Heidegger’s work because of its complicated nature, and due to moral objections regarding his involvement with the Nazi party, are mostly inappropriate, while his influence on the contemporary subject,
and the theories of deconstruction and postmodernism — although mostly unacknowledged — cannot be underestimated. In many ways it is possible to read this narrative of Heidegger’s life as a manifestation of many of the fundamental elements of his theoretical propositions. If *Dasein* was to become transparent with an analysis of Being-in-the-world, then although his membership of the Nazi party can be seen as a reaction to the crises afflicting Germany, it can equally be read as a manifestation of his own deterministic desire for ‘authentic Being’ and a resurgent national identity.23 Furthermore, that Heidegger revisited his earlier work and deconstructed many of his metaphysical concepts can be seen as an inevitable response to the condition of the possibility of change that only hindsight can bring. Finally, it becomes apparent that Being always already resists being determined in concrete terms due to the impact of the environing world, and that Heidegger’s personal failings ultimately elucidate the unavoidable highs and lows of ‘Being’ human, and of the constant temptation of the worst kind of metaphysical determinism — fascism.

2.3.a. Jacques Derrida — Deconstruction and the Diminished Subject

Given that so much has been written by Jacques Derrida any discussion of his deconstructive work is necessarily fraught with the very hazards that his approach repeatedly illustrates are not merely possible, but inevitable. Given that so much has been written by Derrida, yet negative accusations surrounding its apparent content abound due to the somewhat obtuse nature of his work, I shall let others speak about him rather than presume to speak for him. Given that so much has been written about Derrida in an act of contrition I shall attempt — with my re-reading of re-readings and while recognising the myriad ‘play’ of differences in his works — to use these controversies to expand this teleology of the diminished subject. As such, given the broad scope of Derrida’s work24 I shall focus initially on his early texts and the proposition that an inherently fragmented subject is an ineluctable aspect of being and
not specifically postmodern. Then in the latter sections I will discuss the critical backlash against Derrida given the manner in which certain aspects of his work have been appropriated by, and closely associated with, nihilistic postmodernism. And finally, I shall investigate the manner in which his ‘performative’ work reiterates the proposition of an a priori diminished subject, and the validity of literature as a locus for the exploration of alternative expressions of subjectivity.

2.3.b. Derrida, Deconstruction and the Diminished Subject

What deconstruction is not? everything of course!
What is deconstruction? nothing of course!

Derrida insists it is naïve to speak of ‘the Subject’ as if it were a mythical entity that has only been recently abandoned. The ‘subjects’ of Descartes, Kant, Hegel and Husserl are not themselves simple but involve paradoxes and aporias that deserve renewed consideration. Derrida would like to ‘de-homogenize’ the subject. Nobody, he maintains, ever seriously believed in the classical humanist subject, autonomous self-sufficient, spontaneous. ‘The subject never existed for anyone […] the subject is a fable’
— Christina Howells, in Derrida: Deconstruction from Phenomenology to Ethics (1999:142).

It is with a view to the failure of Husserlian phenomenology to escape the aporia of metaphysics, and of Heidegger to make a break with the ontology of Western philosophy that I shall begin my discussion of Jacques Derrida. While it is apparent that the desires of both Husserl and Heidegger to implement non-metaphysical approaches to the study of knowable phenomena failed, their slippages and difficulties provide a view of Derrida’s work as an expansion of several of their key ideas, rather than a complete conceptual break. Furthermore, it is with his reworking of Heidegger’s concept of ‘Destruktion,’ his discussion of their investigations of presence and time, and their failed attempts to break with the onto-theological tradition of Western philosophy, that initiate this discussion of Derrida, deconstruction and contemporary subjectivity.

Given the atemporal teleology of the crises of philosophy and subjectivity carried out thus far in this thesis, it is interesting to note a shift in focus in the work of Derrida,
for up to this point these crises have been temporal in nature — fixed by specific cultural and social upheavals — with a resultant loss of faith in the dominant philosophical tradition of the day. While both Husserl and Heidegger were concerned with the ontological tradition of Western metaphysics, their impetus was a response to certain crises of the early twentieth century, and a desire to arrive at a complete understanding of Being. However, with deconstruction Derrida makes a break with this cycle diminishing the self-present subject in a far more dramatic manner, indicating that this crisis of the metaphysics of presence is an ineluctable aspect of subjectivity, and not a particular failure of philosophy, but due to its failure in toto.

So what is deconstruction, and what does Derrida hope to achieve by it? One of the difficulties when discussing his work is that it is inherently ‘performative,’ although it would suffice to say that if one was to deterministically posit his aim, one could argue, as many have, that he is, among many other things, attempting to defamiliarise the seemingly a priori tradition of the ‘metaphysics of presence’ that predominates not only Western philosophy, but everyday language. As Derrida explains in ‘Semiology and Grammatology: Interview with Julia Kristeva:’ “‘everyday language’ is not innocent or neutral. It is the language of Western metaphysics, and it carries with it not only a considerable number of presuppositions of all types, but also presuppositions inseparable from metaphysics, which, although little attended to, are knotted into a system” (1981:19). It is important to note that far from calling for an end to this tradition, Derrida exposes both his and our complicity with it by deconstructing key philosophical arguments and conceptual orders, and thereby upsetting many by undermining the traditional, yet problematic, view of the self-present subject.

When discussing deconstruction it is important to point out what it is not, and accusations that it amounts to the destruction the previous certitude of the ontological tradition of Western metaphysical philosophy, are misplaced. In his ‘Letter to a
Japanese Friend,’ Derrida explains the etymological and theoretical origins of
deconstruction, stating that:

When I chose this word, or when it imposed itself upon me — I think it was in Of
Grammatology — I little thought it would be credited with such a central role in the
discourse that interested me at the time. Among other things I wished to translate and
adapt to my own ends the Heideggerian word Destruktion or Abbau. Each signified
in this context an operation bearing on the structure or traditional architecture of the
fundamental concepts of ontology or of Western metaphysics. But in French
‘destruction’ too obviously implied an annihilation or a negative reduction much
closer perhaps to Nietzschean ‘demolition’ than to the Heideggerian interpretation or
to the type of reading that I proposed. So I ruled that out (1998:1).

Derrida indicates that there is no actual destruction in de(con)struction, arguing that
claims as such are in fact, a ‘con,’ and that the coining of this non-concept was due to
the inadequate nature of the closest French translation of Heidegger’s neologism. That
is, rather than calling for, and attempting to make a destructive break with this
metaphysical tradition, deconstruction defamiliarises those seemingly a priori
conceptual discourses by indicating that the inherent contradictions within any given
philosophical premise necessarily undermine their arguments. As Nicholas Royle points
out in his text, Jacques Derrida: “deconstruction is not a method, a tool or technique for
reading texts, especially not literary texts […] Deconstruction is not something brought
in from the outside, like a band of ‘special forces:’ it is a foreign body, already inside. It
is a kind of founding excess, exorbitance or supplementarity” (2003:85). That is, if we
can agree on a conceptual understanding of this non-concept, deconstruction is not
brought to bear on a theory but is an ineluctable aspect of all texts — something that
exists at the margins — and it is in the periphery that Derrida finds his passage into
the metaphysics of philosophy and subjectivity.

Having discussed what deconstruction may or may not be, I shall now question
Derrida’s interest in deconstructing the metaphysics of presence, and how this relates to
the diminished subject. For Derrida, the tradition of Western metaphysics has been
captured up in an onto-theological approach whereby Being equals presence, and with
attempts to understand existence through the search for the truth of Being. In ‘Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,’ he argues that:

The history of metaphysics, like the history of the West, is the history of these metaphors and metonymies. Its matrix […] is the determination of Being as presence in all senses of this word. It could be shown that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always designated an invariable presence — *eidos*, *arché*, *telos*, *energeia*, *ousia* (essence, existence, substance, subject) *alétheia*, transcendality, consciousness, God, man, and so forth (1997:279-80).

For Derrida, therefore, the history of Western philosophy has focussed on determining the existence of God with a comforting perspective of the subject as purely self-present, leading philosophy into a metaphysical *aporia*. If the conceptual framework of contemporary philosophy is corrupted by metaphysics, then *ipso facto*, the object of its study is necessarily absent, while any solution without phenomenological grounding is invariably metaphysical, as seen with Husserl’s ‘transcendental ego.’ However, in order to deconstruct this tradition, we necessarily use, and unwittingly legitimate, the very concepts and discourses we hope to undermine, thus leading us into yet another *aporia*, for any attempt to discuss Western metaphysical philosophy without recourse to its ontology would be nonsense.

One of the more controversial outcomes of Derrida’s investigation into the inherently metaphysical nature of Western philosophy has been the claim that this theoretical *impasse* — this conceptual *aporia* — has resulted in the death of both history and philosophy. In ‘The Supplement of Origin,’ Derrida explains the apparent demise of history stating that:

*Within* the metaphysics of presence, within philosophy as knowledge of the presence of the object, as the being-before-oneself of knowledge in consciousness, we believe, quite simply and literally, in absolute knowledge as the closure if not the end of history. And we believe that such a closure has taken place. The history of being as presence, as self-presence in absolute knowledge, as consciousness of self in the infinity of *parousia* — this history is closed. The history of presence is closed, for ‘history’ has never meant anything but the presentation […] of Being, the production and recollection of beings in presence, as knowledge and mastery (1996:102).
For Derrida, if the tradition of Western philosophy since Plato and Aristotle is one based on an initial conceptual problematic, then its very foundation is based on an unknowable transcendental premise. He explains this *aporia* in ‘Violence and Metaphysics’ arguing that despite its death: “philosophy should still wander toward the meaning of its death — or that it has always lived knowing itself to be dying […]; that philosophy died *one day, within* history, or that it has always fed on its own agony, on the violent way it opens history by opposing itself to nonphilosophy, which is its past and its concern, its death and wellspring; that beyond the death, or dying nature, of philosophy, perhaps even because of it, thought still has a future […] all these are unanswerable questions. By right of birth, and for one time at least, these are problems put to philosophy as problems philosophy cannot resolve” (1997:79). If this is the case then traditional philosophy has been ineluctably travelling toward its demise, with no way of escaping the metaphysical concepts carried within it, nor any possibility of describing the object of its study in a purely present manner due to the arbitrary nature of language. Furthermore, the supposed ‘death’ of philosophy further undermines the possibility of the self-present subject, and although Derrida argues that Western philosophy began with an originary *aporia*, as Howells explains: “‘Violence et métaphysique’ starts with the large issue of the ‘death of philosophy,’ envisaged not as the end of serious reflection but rather as, potentially, the beginning of another, less limited kind of (philosophical) questioning” (1999:123). That is, despite this ‘death’ being blamed on Derrida’s anti-metaphysical deconstruction, this statement has been taken to mean much more, with far-reaching implications for contemporary theory.

Given that the deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence appears to be the locus of Derrida’s efforts to defamiliarise seemingly *a priori* conceptual orders, I shall now discuss several key aspects of his approach that have specific relevance to this thesis. The first of these being his deconstruction of the prioritisation of rhetoric over
writing — inaugurated with Plato’s logocentric ‘wrong turn’ — and the resulting judgements that valorise the philosophical over the literary. Secondly, his investigation into Saussurian linguistics, and the inherent contradiction whereby the play of differences between arbitrary signs undermines the divisions of the ‘wrong turn.’ While finally, the impact that his deconstruction of logocentrism and the resultant absence of a self-present ‘transcendental signifier,’ have had on the contemporary subject.

Plato articulated the need for a division between speech and writing in both the *Phaedrus* and the *Republic*, and his attempt to address a perceived crisis in Greek society not only marks the historical ascendancy of logocentrism, it at once formed the basis of Western philosophy and, according to Derrida, its inevitable demise. Plato’s distrust of writing and metaphor stemmed from a belief that speech was the ultimate expression of self-present consciousness truth, while metaphorical writing was repeatable, open to mis-interpretation, and therefore dangerous to the stable republic he envisioned would end decades of civil unrest and war. Christopher Norris explains Plato’s position is one that believes: “writing is the readiest means to acquire all those forms of unearned or gratuitous wisdom which the sophists and mythologists then passed off as the genuine goods […] It is through writing that the logos is deflected from its proper, truth-seeking aim and abandoned to a state of hazardous dependence on the vagaries of *unauthorized* transmission” (1988:32). However, Plato’s treatment of writing is not originary, but rather an ineluctable aspect of an arbitrary system of signs that undermine any possibility of self-present truth by being necessarily repeatable. Furthermore, in *Of Grammatology* Derrida points out that, despite his protestations, Plato was still reliant on metaphorical writing, — as seen in the *Phaedrus*, the *Republic* and in Socrates’ *Dialogues* — and neither was he alone in this for as he points out: “As was the case with the Platonic writing of the truth in the soul, in the Middle Ages too it is a writing understood in the metaphoric sense, that is to say a *natural*, eternal,
and universal writing, the system of signified truth, which is recognized in its dignity. As in the *Phaedrus*, a certain fallen writing continues to be opposed to it” (1997:15). That is, according to Derrida, despite the predominance of logocentrism in Western philosophy, the division of pure speech and fallen writing, and any value judgements of philosophy over literature can be seen to be problematic. Another way in which Derrida defamiliarised the seemingly *a priori* division of speech and writing — along with the claims of self-present truth of the latter — can be seen with his deconstruction of Saussure’s theory of signs in *Of Grammatology*. Without unnecessarily repeating this well-known proposition of the deterministic relationship between sign, signifier and signified, it will suffice to say that the seeds of its demise came from within, as we find when Derrida carries out his deconstruction when quoting Saussure in the *Course*:

“it can be said that entirely arbitrary signs realize better than any others the ideal of the semiological process,” and that “it is not spoken language that is natural to man, but the faculty of constituting a language, that is, a system of distinct signs” (Quoted in Derrida:1981:21). That is, Derrida uses Saussure’s own text to deconstruct the *a priori* presupposition that speech is the self-present expression of consciousness — despite its arbitrary nature — and goes on to explain the implications for the traditional priority of philosophy over the literary in *Of Grammatology*:

The written signifier is always technical and representative. It has no constitutive meaning. This derivation is the very origin of the notion of the ‘signifier.’ The notion of the sign always implies within itself the distinction between signifier and signified, even if, as Saussure argues, they are distinguished simply as the two faces of one and the same leaf. This notion remains therefore within the heritage of that logocentrism which is also a phonocentrism: absolute proximity of the voice and being, of voice and the meaning of being, of voice and the ideality of meaning (1997:11-12).

Thus, for Derrida the recognition of the arbitrary nature of both spoken and written language terminally undermines the truth claims inherent in the history of Western metaphysical philosophy, and the valorisation of the philosophical over the poetic and the rhetorical over the literary. Furthermore, along with doubts regarding the possibility
of self-present speech we see the impossibility of the speaking subject ever expressing pure consciousness. As Howells explains: “Writing implies inscription, the possibility of repetition, and a range of conventional differentiating features. All these elements run counter to the myth of pure presence, and all are to be found in speech. It is not possible to maintain that speech is free of them if the signifier/signified relationship is recognized to be arbitrary” (1999:49). By virtue of their arbitrary nature, the truth-values of writing and speech are undermined by the inherent possibility of misinterpretation through repetition, and by the metaphysical nature of the system of signs we necessarily adopt in order that we articulate ourselves to others.

Another outcome of Derrida’s deconstruction of the Saussurian algorithm arose from what he would refer to as the ‘play’ of differences — or ‘différance’ — explaining in his seminal text of that name, that: “Saussure had only to remind us that the play of difference was the functional condition, the condition of possibility, for every sign; and it is itself silent” (1996:133). Having already defamiliarised and undermined the a priori truth claims of the logos, he indicates that rather than speech and writing being purely self-present, meaning is always already absent due to an unavoidable process of deferral — the fundamental expression of this process being his neologism — and although much has been written about différance, the importance of this non-concept is that it continues the defamiliarisation of the metaphysics of presence, and indicates the a priori nature of diminished subjectivity.

Aside from cleverly highlighting the entwined nature of speech and writing by replacing the ‘e’ of différence with the ‘a’ of différance — thus indicating the difficulty in delimiting these phonetically similar words without recourse to writing — Derrida argues that these slippages are the result of the inevitable ‘play’ of differences between signs, explaining that: “The verb ‘to differ’ [différer] seems to differ from itself. On the one hand, it indicates difference as distinction, inequality, or discernibility; on the
other hand, it expresses the interposition of delay, the interval of a *spacing* and *temporalizing* that puts off until ‘later’ what is presently denied, the possible that is presently impossible” (129). That is, for Derrida this ‘play’ not only defers meaning throughout the system of signs, it undermines the traditional view of spoken language as purely self-present to consciousness, and argues in ‘The Supplement of Origin’ that *différance* is: “the operation of differing which at one and the same time both fissures and retards presence, submitting it simultaneously to primordial division and delay” (88). Thus, the self-present subject is always already *in absentia* due to a ‘play’ of differences, which not only proposes a view of subjectivity as diminished, it also casts doubts as to the temporal specificity of the crises of the postmodern condition.

While it is clear that Derrida’s deconstruction of the conceptual order and the metaphysics of presence has caused controversy among certain contemporary theorists, the loudest cries of horror were saved for his proclamation in *Of Grammatology* that: “*There is nothing outside of the text* […]; *il n’y a pas de hors texte*” (1997:158), following his formulations on Saussure and language in “…That Dangerous Supplement…” Having expressed the impossibility of speech and writing ever articulating pure self-presence due to the arbitrary nature of language and the non-presence of a ‘transcendental signified,’34 with this statement Derrida indicates the unavoidable yet compromised relationship between the two. In his ‘Translator’s Introduction’ to *Speech and Phenomena*, David B. Allison explains this proposition:

Derrida concludes that the whole problem and history of language must be entirely rethought. Instead of trying to capture and retain a pure presence, we must conceive signification from the start as a movement *away* from self-presence, a movement away from the pure presence of a discrete origin and the ideal presence of an identical meaning-content. As a movement of difference, signification precedes and gives rise to the very concepts of self, presence and meaning (1996:xxxvii).

For Derrida, rather than language expressing pure consciousness, through the process of ‘play’ and *différance* there occurs an absence whereby self-presence, already once removed, is re-read, re-inscribed, and as we shall see later, transformed. Furthermore,
his perspective of language is one whereby self-presence is undermined due to its linguistic nature, and recognised as the fiction of an arbitrary metaphysical system of signs. Allison explains that for Derrida: “What is signified in the present, then, necessarily includes the differentiating and nonpresent system of signifiers in its very meaning. We can only assemble and recall the traces of what went before; we stand within language, not outside it” (xxxviii). Thus, for Derrida the subject of language does not exist outside of the text as all representations are expressed by an arbitrary ‘play’ of signs, explaining in ‘Freud and the Scene of Writing’ that: “pure perception does not exist: we are written only as we write, by the agency within us which always already keeps watch over perception, be it internal or external. The ‘subject’ of writing does not exist if we mean by that some sovereign solitude of the author. The subject of writing is a system of relations between strata: […] the psyche, society, the world. Within that scene, on that stage, the punctual simplicity of the classical subject is not to be found” (1997:226-27). Finally then, as a result of this discussion of deconstruction it is not only possible to view traditional metaphysical discourses as inherently problematic, but that Derrida’s view of language also calls into question self-present subjectivity, and it is to the implications of this proposition that I shall now turn my attention.

2.3.c. Derrida and Postmodernism? — Deconstruction in Translation

No one gets angry with a mathematician or with a doctor he doesn’t understand at all, or with someone who speaks a foreign language, but when somebody touches your own language, […] I assure you that I never give in to the temptation of being difficult for its own sake. It would be too easy. I believe only in the necessity of taking the time — or, rather, of leaving it, of not ironing out the wrinkles, the folds. For philosophical or political reasons, the problem of communication and admissibility, with its new techno-economic givens, is more serious than ever before, for everyone. We can only come to terms with it uneasily, through contradiction and compromise.


Having examined the manner in which Derrida’s work undermines the primacy of the metaphysics of presence with his view of the subject of language, I shall now turn to
various responses to this proposition, focussing specifically on the appropriation of deconstruction, and the resultant controversy surrounding certain (mis)-readings of his work, leading to an unfortunate association with post-structuralism and postmodernism. A catalyst for negative readings of Derrida’s work can be traced back to his (in)famous statement that ‘nothing exists outside the text.’ In *Debating Derrida* Niall Lucy indicates the critical reception of this statement explaining that: “Somehow the statement ‘there is no outside the text’ has been taken to mean that there is no truth, no reality, no history, no actual flesh-and-blood people in the world, no rocks and trees, disease, sex, poverty, or physical violence. All there is instead is a form of fiction in extremis: nothing can said to be in so far as it has been made up, constructed, put together from language, discourse, signs” (1995:1). While such negative reactions have seen Derrida labelled an anti-humanist, the focus of deconstruction on the textual nature of subjectivity has seen many of his neologisms being adeptly, if not wholly appropriately, adopted by English speaking literary departments.35 This tendency has not escaped Derrida’s attention wherein he argues that ‘deconstruction’ is: “a word whose fortunes have disagreeably surprised me” (Quoted in Norris:1987:44), while Christopher Norris argues that the fortunes of deconstruction: “have certainly been more bound up with literary criticism than with philosophy, at least in the current (institutional) sense of those terms. One result has been the refusal by many philosophers in the mainstream Anglo-American tradition to take Derrida seriously, or to read his texts with anything like the requisite care and attention” (113). This unfortunate tendency to conflate deconstruction with literary criticism and postmodernism, has led Jürgen Habermas, among many, to base their arguments against Derrida’s primary texts on secondary sources, leading to a variety of ill-informed critiques of his work.36
A further difficulty in any reception of Derrida’s writing formulates itself in the ultimate example of the ‘play’ of differences — that of translation. Although, the inherent possibility of mistranslation is an example par excellence of the impossibility of self-presence — and given that Derrida would never argue for closed readings of any of his texts — it cannot be denied that various translations of his work have led to certain unwarranted responses. The difficulties faced by the translator of any text, let alone those of Derrida, is expressed by Gayatri Spivak in the ‘Translator’s Preface’ to Of Grammatology, wherein she explains that: “Derrida’s text certainly offers its share of ‘untranslatable’ words […] To an extent, this problem informs the entire text. Denying the uniqueness of words, their substantiality, their transferability, their repeatability, Of Grammatology denies the possibility of translation […] That playfulness I fear I have not been able remotely to capture” (1997:lxxxv-vi).37 Ironically, it is in fact this performative (play)fulness that adds to the difficulty of translating Derrida’s neologisms and of the many, and varied, responses to them.

In his text, System and Writing in the Philosophy of Jacques Derrida, Christopher Johnson clearly indicates the problems caused by the random uninformed appropriation of Derrida’s neologisms — mainly by Anglo-American literary critics — the resultant devaluing of his patently philosophical work, and the impact that his notoriously difficult texts have had on contemporary theory, arguing that:

Too often the emphasis has rested on what might be termed Derrida’s special theory of writing, the preliminary critique or deconstruction of the phono- and logocentric subordination of writing, found in the ‘classic’ texts of the period 1967-72. This has most often been the case in literary critical interpretations and appropriations of the theory of writing. Such readings have involved, on the one hand, a privileging of the notions of ‘texte’ and ‘écriture’ [...] and on the other, the treatment of literature as ‘jeu,’ with its notorious English (mis)translation of ‘free play’ (1993:8).

It is this mistranslation of ‘jeu’ as ‘free play’ that has resulted in some of the more extreme and nihilistic aspects of post-structuralism and postmodernism, leading several well-known academics to turn against Derrida and deconstruction by conflating all three
disciplines without necessarily reading his work. In a prime example of the incorrect association of Derrida with postmodernism we find Frederic Jameson explaining that: “no matter how desirable this postmodern philosophical free play may be, it cannot now be practiced; however conceivable and imaginable it may have become as a philosophical aesthetic [...] anti-systematic writing today is condemned to remain within the system” (1990:27). Although Jameson refers to this postmodern ‘free play,’ at no time does Derrida view deconstruction as ‘free’ of the metaphysical ontology of Western philosophy, and although Jameson supports this perspective, his own critique of postmodernism is replete with Derridean tropes and mistranslated neologisms.

The apparent inherent difficulty in Derrida’s work has not only resulted in these mistranslations and cursory readings criticising his work for a lack of critical finality and content, but has also seen deconstruction viciously attacked as a result of the personal history of its antecedents and purveyors. Christina Howells explores the manner in which the backlash against Derrida entered the public arena:

Accused by the right of iconoclasm and dangerous irresponsibility, and by the left of fostering inactivity by rendering political action unjustifiable, Derrida’s work is certainly far too difficult of access to find favour with the common-sense anti-obscurantism of centrist liberal thinkers. The links between deconstruction and the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, who for a period was a member and supporter of the Nazi party, and the case of the (Belgian) Yale deconstructionist, Paul de Man, whose youthful writings were discovered after his death to be arguably sympathetic to fascist anti-Semitism, have clouded the issue further (1999:122).

That Heidegger’s personal history, and Derrida’s friendship with Paul de Man became the basis for a critical backlash against deconstruction indicates the extent of the vitriol levelled against his gravely misunderstood insights into the defamiliarisation of a priori metaphysical conceptual orders. As Howell’s indicates: “Deconstruction was, in the popular press and imagination, gleefully tarred with the same brush of Nazi sympathy” (137-38). Rather than carrying out independent readings of Derrida’s work, the majority of these negative responses are based on twice removed re-readings of secondary sources based on mistranslations of his non-originary texts, thus becoming examples of
the ‘play’ of difference *par excellence*. If Derrida’s work is performative, then this critical response — which led him to write *De l’esprit* and *Memoires de le Paul De Man* — not only support his view of deconstruction, but must have amused him greatly.

Finally then, it is clear that Derrida’s seemingly taken-for-granted position as the progenitor of post-structuralism, and close association with negative theories of postmodernism, are misplaced. In an attempt to distance himself from these unwarranted associations we find him explaining in his ‘Letter to a Japanese Friend,’ that although deconstruction was necessarily a structuralist enterprise, given its reliance on the metaphysical ontology of philosophy to remain meaningful: “it was also an antistructuralist gesture, and its fortune rests in part on this ambiguity. Structures were to be undone, decomposed, desedimented […] This is why, especially in the United States, the motif of deconstruction has been associated with ‘poststructuralism’ (a word unknown in France until its ‘return’ from the United States)” (1988:2-3). Therefore the repeated association of Derrida with postmodernism is in need of serious revision, for as Lucy explains:

Today’s ‘post,’ nevertheless, contains a widespread belief that ‘today’ is radically and fundamentally different from the past. Especially in the name of ‘postmodernism’ (or in what is often attributed to it), extreme versions of this belief have resulted in the ridiculous assertions of how ‘we’ can escape from binarity and therefore be no longer in the thrall of such oppositions as creative/critical, imagination/history, philosophy/politics, man/woman, and so on. There are good reasons for regarding what may be called oxymoronically, the ‘postmodern project’ as idealist, romanticist, and rhetorical — in a word logocentric — rather than radically pragmatic. But there are no good reasons for regarding Derrida as a postmodernist (1995:88).

As already explained, the actions of deconstruction are simply to defamiliarise seemingly *a priori* metaphysical discourses by highlighting the problematics buried within the margins of those very texts. Derrida, therefore, is not diminishing a previously attainable self-presence consciousness, nor calling for the end of history or philosophy, but rather acknowledges that the metaphysics of presence is always involved in the process of deconstruction. Norris goes on to state that: “Deconstruction
is not, [Derrida] insists, either a ‘method,’ a ‘technique’ or a species of ‘critique.’ Sometimes Derrida disclaims all responsibility for such misreadings, regarding them as a kind of *déformation professionelle*, the result of grafting deconstruction on to an activity (that of literary criticism) with its very own needs and requirements” (1987:18).

Gasché indicates the predominant view of a lack of critical content in Derrida’s work pointing out that: “one aspect, more than obvious to the philosopher, is that deconstruction in the first place represents a critique of reflexivity, and specularity. It is the unawareness of this essential feature of deconstruction that has caused the easy accommodation of deconstruction by contemporary American criticism” (1979:183). Therefore, it becomes clear that much of what has been negatively attributed to Derrida is in fact speculation — predominantly carried out by Anglo-American literary critics — resulting in appropriated philosophical neologisms being applied deterministically and unquestioningly to literature. However, despite this distance between Derrida and literary criticism, there is cause to question his own position regarding the literary, due to the performative nature of his writing style and obvious interest in literature.

2.3.e. The Margins of Philosophy — Derrida and the literary

Despite the manifest relevance to literary studies of the relation between reading and misreading, the implications of deconstruction for the study of literature are far from clear. Derrida frequently writes about literary works but has not dealt with topics such as the task of literary criticism, the methods for analyzing literary language, or the nature of meaning in literature.

There are thus two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of play. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign, and which lives the necessity of interpretation as an exile. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who, throughout his entire history — has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of play.

Having outlined the manner in which deconstruction elucidates the *a priori aporia* of the diminished self-present subject, and the spurious association of Derrida with post-
structuralism and postmodernism, I shall now investigate his view of the subject and literature. Having explained the misguided accusations aimed at Derrida regarding his supposed call for the end of the delimitation of philosophy and literature, and a ‘levelling’ of genre distinctions in the name of literary criticism, it is important to note that this controversy again highlights the inherently performative nature of his writing. Jonathan Culler explains Derrida’s deconstruction of definite discursive boundaries, and his view of the arbitrary system of signs, in *On Deconstruction*, stating that:

Reading philosophy as a literary genre, Derrida has taught us to consider philosophical writings as texts with a performative as well as cognitive dimension, as heterogeneous constructs, organizing and organized by a variety of discursive forces, never simply present to themselves or in control of their implications, and related in complex ways to a variety of other texts, written and lived (1993:182).

While this appears as a well-executed summary of Derrida’s deconstructive aims, it also expresses a certain metaphysics, whereby Derrida is accused of ‘reading philosophy as a literary genre.’ Rather than calling for a ‘levelling,’ a blurring, or even a reversal of genre distinctions, Derrida argues firstly that all genres are metaphysical, and secondly that all texts carry the tropes of a variety of genres. In ‘The Law of Genre’ he states that any ‘law’ regarding genre: “is precisely a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy” (1992:227), and goes on to argue that: “I submit for your consideration the following hypothesis: a text would not belong to any genre. Every text participates in one or several genres, that there is no genreless text, there is always a genre and genres, yet such a participation never amounts to a belonging” (230). Therefore, as we have seen with the deconstruction of the self-present subject, Derrida is not arguing for the destruction of genres or encouraging discursive chaos, but rather, he is indicating the arbitrary nature of these constructs and questions the prioritisation of certain genres over others — as already seen with the arbitrary distinction between philosophy and literature.
Despite Derrida’s concerted efforts to distance himself from literary criticism, and the post-structuralist and postmodernist theories attributed to him, there is no denying the impact of the literary on both the content and style of his work. Working in the margins of philosophy, exploring anecdotes, footnotes and the metaphorical in both mainstream and little known philosophical texts, Derrida not only made constant reference to works of literature, his writing style was also experimental in nature. In ‘Signature Event Context,’ he explains the nature of performative writing seeing it as: “a ‘communication’ which does not essentially limit itself to transporting an already constituted semantic content guarded by it own aiming at truth (truth as an unveiling of that which is in its Being, or as an adequation between a judicative statement and the thing itself)” (1972:322). That is, given the nature of his philosophical approach in defamiliarising the metaphysics of presence, and an awareness of the inherent metaphysical culpability involved in deconstruction, his writing style does offer an alternative and creative mode of expression.

Christina Howells supports the view that Derrida was not only interested in deconstructing the artificial truth claims prioritising philosophy over literature, but that he was also interested in doing this stylistically, arguing that:

Derrida’s writing is in itself ‘performative,’ that is, it enacts what it describes; it is not merely constantive and argumentative, but it exemplifies the features it is discussing. This kind of language use is alien to most philosophical traditions, and is more readily thought of as a feature of literary texts; but […] another feature of the Derridean strategy is to undo the conventional distinction between literature and philosophy and the hierarchy which subordinates the former to the latter (1999:71).

And this can be seen no clearer than in ‘The Supplement of Origin,’ wherein the following metaphoric passage we find Derrida referring to his own undertaking: “It remains, then, for us to speak, to make our voices resonate throughout the corridors in order to make up for […] the breakup of presence. The phoneme, the akoumenon, is the phenomenon of the labyrinth. This is the case with the phone. Rising toward the sun of presence, it is the way of Icarus” (1996:104). Yet despite this tendency we see in
Newton Garver’s ‘Preface’ to *Speech and Phenomena* that this approach does not sit comfortably with many: “We cannot complain just because Derrida is often obscure, for the problems are exceedingly difficult, and a demand for pedestrian prose would be misplaced. But clarity is more than just pedestrian. Faced with Derrida’s unrestrained literary extravagance, one cannot help wondering if the heavy reliance upon metaphor and paradox is not also misplaced” (xxvi). However, unlike Garver, I believe these difficulties not only reflect the problematic nature of Derrida’s task, they deliberately elucidate the inherently problematic nature of all language usage.

Although negative criticisms of a lack of content in Derrida’s texts abound, it becomes apparent that this literary focus, and indeed his own performative writing style, can lead us to view his work differently. In fact, he makes this apparent himself in ‘Violence and Metaphysics’ wherein he explains that:

> Henceforward, the heliological *metaphor* only turns away our glance, providing an alibi for the historical violence of light: a displacement of technico-political oppression in the direction of philosophical discourse. For it has always been believed that metaphors exculpate, lift the weight of things and of acts. If there is no history, except through language, and if language (except when it names Being *itself* or nothing: almost never) is elementally metaphorical, Borges is correct: ‘Perhaps universal history is but the history of several metaphors’ (1997:92).

Finally then, it is possible to read, or rather re-read, in Derrida that certain cathartic expressions of subjectivity, and alternatives to dominant conceptual orders, can be found in the metaphoricity of the literary. Nicholas Royle supports this view when explaining that for Derrida: “The interest of literature goes far beyond aesthetic or formalist concerns: his focus is on the importance of the literary work having transformed and in continuing to transform the ways in which we think, for example not only about ‘writing’ in its narrow sense, but about history, politics, democracy and law, the world itself” (2003:86). And I determine that this view of Derrida’s work highlights the fundamental importance that both deconstruction and literature can have in defamiliarising the arbitrary nature of any expression of subjectivity, which despite
fundamentally diminishing the metaphysics of self-presence also empowers the individual with the inherent recognition that the condition of the possibility of change is an ineluctable aspect of all discursive formations.

2.4.a. In Summation — Chapter 2

Despite the divergent theoretical and temporal loci of these three theorists, it is my contention that the theme of a fragmented and divided subject can be clearly traced from the anti-metaphysical phenomenological approaches of Husserl and Heidegger, through to Derridean deconstruction. Firstly we see that, despite his determination to avoid the trap of metaphysics, Husserl attempted to address a perceived temporally specific crisis in subjectivity and philosophy, yet fell victim to the trap of metaphysics of comfort when he determined a way out of his theoretical aporia with the ‘transcendental ego,’ despite being plagued with personal doubts that diminished his belief in the validity of his pursuit. Secondly, we find Heidegger attempting to overcome the ontological crisis of philosophy by coining his own metaphysical neologisms in Being and Time. Yet despite having an acute appreciation of the a priori trap of determinism, he still embraced the brutal totalitarian metaphysics of comfort in the form of National Socialism, with a misguided belief that it would assuage the various crises afflicting depression ridden post-war Germany. Although Heidegger would eventually appreciate the inherently discursive nature of the subject in progress, his philosophical influence was greatly diminished as a result of his fascistic treatment of Husserl and involvement with the Nazi Party. Finally then we find Jacques Derrida scouring the margins of various discourses in order to deconstruct the a priori play of differences within the ontology of metaphysical philosophy, happily aware of his own complicity in the hermeneutic circle, while undoubtedly disturbing a great many. Thus, with these three theoreticians we witness repeated examples of the a priori aporia of the diminished subject, view the importance of literary expressions of alternative counter-
discursive subjectivity, observe the refutation of the validity of a supposedly contemporary postmodern crisis, and recognise the inherent dangers of the discourses of determinism and fascism which, thankfully, are always already under threat due to their inherently arbitrary nature, and the condition of possibility of change.

Notes:

1 This attitude can clearly be seen in Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy wherein Husserl states: “Still, just as man (and even the Papuan) represents a new level of animality — in comparison with the beast — so with regard to humanity and its reason does philosophical reason represent a new level. The level of human existence with its ideal norms for infinite tasks, the level of existence sub specie aeternitatis, is, however, possible only in the form of absolute universality, precisely that which is a priori included in the ideas of philosophy” (1965:179). That is, for Husserl, philosophy and reason not only raise man above the ‘beast,’ they indicate a stratum among ‘men’ whereby philosophical certitude becomes the benchmark of societal excellence.

2 However, as Quentin Lauer points out in his ‘Introduction’ to Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy, Husserl’s perspective of consciousness differed greatly from that of the cogito: “It was Descartes who, in his Meditations, revealed to Husserl the possibility […] of seeking a universally rational science of being by turning from a consideration of the objective world to a reflective consideration of the thinking subject. Unlike Descartes, however, Husserl will not look upon this knowledge of the subject as a first indubitabile principle from which all other knowledge can be derived. Instead, taking the cogitatium as the objective correlate of the cogito, he will see in subjectivity the one and only (transcendental) source of all absolute, objectively valid knowledge, because the subjectivity of consciousness and only here is the being of objectivity absolute” (1965:20). Christopher Norris also examines the relation between Husserl and Descartes explaining that: “Husserl’s main aim was to break this charmed circle of consciousness by showing how the mind took possession of experience, relating thought to the object-of-thought through an act of structured perception. Thinking no longer takes place in the solipsistic realm of reflection cut off from the reality it vainly strives to grasp. Philosophy is reconstructed on the pared-down but firm foundations of a knowledge in and of the world” (1982:44).

3 Lauer explains Husserl’s approach to the scientific study of spirituality thus: “[I]t is Western man’s failure to live up to his philosophical destiny which has brought him to the crisis before which he now stands. He is sick, and there is no available cure for his illness. There is a science of medicine to cure his sick body, but there is no science of the spirit to cure his sick soul. If there is to be such a science — and there must be — it cannot simply satisfy itself with empirical observation; only a strict science will do. Nor can such a science of the spiritual subject who is man be merely psycho-physical science — though it cannot spurn the help of this latter. It is important to realize that it cannot be a science of nature at all; it cannot be ‘objective’ the way a science of nature must be. The world it is to study is not the objective world of nature but the ‘environing world’ (Umwelt) of the spiritual subject” (1965:16). Therefore, despite his criticism of Hegel’s use of metaphysical concepts, Husserl also experiences this problem by promoting the health of the spirit and soul of the subject. However, given his temporally specific locus it is unlikely that he could escape these predominant logoscentric paradigms.

4 Safranski goes on to explain Husserl’s metaphysical aporia: “Husserl having performed the trick of describing the consciousness process ‘before’ its splitting into ego and world, and hence as an ‘egoless’ one, now, on the transcendental plane, falls back on the idea he had hoped to overcome, the idea of the ego as the owner of its consciousness contents. The ego, only just deconstructed, once more, as in the Cartesian tradition, becomes the highest authority on certainty. It is this turn toward a transcendental ego, the outlines of which had been noticeable since 1913, that will provoke Heidegger’s criticisms in future. Husserl understands the transcendental ego as a kind of substance in which the contents may change without itself changing. The transcendental ego has a suspicious resemblance to the divine spirit, which tradition has always thought of as the unchanging foundation of all world contents. It is not surprising, therefore, that Husserl said about the discovery of the transcendental ego: ‘If I do so by myself, then I am not the human ego’” (1999:80). Thus, being the subject of his environment Husserl replaces the idea of a pseudo religious spirit with a deterministic concept that is unavoidably metaphysical, as Safranski further explains: “there are also moments of temptation when he questions the sense of the whole enterprise. Does one not always inevitably remain a beginner when one attempts to traverse the vast field of consciousness? Is it not like trying to reach an ever-receding horizon? If, therefore, consciousness cannot be exhaustively described and analyzed, then — Husserl’s way out of the impasse — the sack has to be
closed at the other end, at the beginning. The name for this mental short circuit is ‘transcendental ego.’ It is the quintessence of all performances and operations of consciousness, the headwaters region of the stream of consciousness. If [...] ego consciousness develops only secondarily in the perception of perception, how then does one bring a transcendental ego to the beginning of the entire consciousness process? Quite simply by declaring the phenomenological attitude, with which one observes the consciousness process, as the locus of the transcendental ego” (1999:79).

5 Interestingly Lauer takes a contrary position to Safranski arguing that: “Only a careful reading of Husserl’s principle works will reveal how this completely justified cognition is to be achieved, but there are three factors at least indicated in the present selections that point the direction in which Husserl’s thought on the scientific ideal moves. They are: the notion of a cognition whose objective validity can be determined by an examination of the act of knowing itself, the constant necessity of beginning over again in the acquisition of scientific knowledge, and science as an accumulation of established truths achievable only by the cooperative efforts of a community of investigators” (1965:28). That is, whereas Safranski sees Husserl’s rewriting as a sign of doubt, Lauer suggests that this is a necessary aspect of scientific study and that Husserl was a great believer in abandoning ideas and beginning again. However, having said that, given Husserl’s phenomenological reasoning, this rewriting did little to guarantee his desired ‘Archimedean point’ of the certitude of subjectivity.

6 Norris explains Derrida’s critique of Husserl thus: “The idea of temporal deferring is also made explicit in relation to Husserl’s phenomenology. His quest for a grounding philosophy of conscious experience required that Husserl gave some account of time and its various modalities. This was the topic of his book The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness (1929) in which Husserl set out to analyse the different relations and levels of intelligible order which ‘made sense’ of time for the experiencing mind [...] From the phenomenological standpoint, this involved showing how the ‘living present’ of awareness is the privileged point from which memories, both long-and short-term, are organized and given their due sequential meaning. Among Husserl’s most important distinctions is that between retention and representation, the former having to do with immediate (sensory) traces, the latter with experiences recalled over a greater distance of time. It is here that Derrida inserts the deconstructive lever of différence. He points out that Husserl is constantly obliged, by the logic of his own argument, to treat the present as a moment compounded of manifold retentions and anticipations, never existing in the isolated instant of awareness. Time is an endless deferring of presence which drives yet another paradoxical wedge into the project of phenomenology” (1982:46-7).

7 In The Body In Language, Ruthof explains the manner that Husserl undermines the concept of a stable self-present subject in relation to time, when discussing the implications of Derridean différence and the fleeting nature of self-presentation: “The ‘now’ of conceptual realization is no more than an idealization. Husserl speaks of a ‘continuum which is continually modified’ so that the ‘pure now’ of perception ‘is just an ideal limit, something abstract which can be nothing for itself’” (Husserl,1966:62f) [actually p:63] (2000:26). Thus, Husserl undermines his own transcendental argument and metaphysical pursuits, and despite viewing language as a science of the meaning of existence, begins a division of subjectivity that continues with Heidegger and Derrida.

5 Sheehan indicates the extent of these crises explaining that: “These were hard times for Germany, both economically and politically. Right-wing death squads had just murdered Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, and the bodies of other leftist victims were turning up by the scores. The Reichsmark was falling in value and by November 1923 would exchange 4.4 trillion to the dollar. The Versailles Peace Conference was busily paring away 10 percent of Germany’s population, 13 percent of its national territory, and 100 percent of its colonies, as well as imposing [...] a war reparations bill that was worth, in today’s exchange rates, $220 billion” (1993:77).

7 Sheehan goes on to explain not only the extent of Heidegger’s rejection of Husserl’s transcendental ego but how this brought about his own notion of Dasein: “virtually everything the young lecturer had to say in his first course, ‘The Idea of Philosophy and the Problem of Worldview,’ seemed to undercut, or at least to reinterpret radically, Husserl’s own positions on phenomenology. Heidegger’s main attack was on the primacy that Husserl attributed to theory over lived experience and to the pure transcendental ego over what Heidegger at this point called the ‘historical ego’ and ‘the ego of the situation’ and that he would later term ‘Dasein’” (1993:78).

10 Richard Polt examines this tendency pointing out that: “In §7 Heidegger presents his understanding of philosophy as transcendental, hermeneutical, phenomenological ontology. In later years, he preferred to call what he did simply ‘thinking.’ While we might wish he had kept things equally simple here, his jargon is not beyond clarification. Instead of appealing to Husserl, Heidegger explains the term phenomenology by a laborious etymological route [...] The point is that when we examine phenomena, we are not just examining superficial illusions; we are trying to notice ‘the things themselves’ as they reveal themselves to us (49-50/27) (Heidegger is fond of this Husserlian motto, although he abandons most of Husserl’s technical terminology)” (1999:38).
Heidegger’ or ‘Heidegger II.’ This transformation is usually known as the ‘turn’ or

... may have allowed him to set aside an old set of concepts

— Martin Heidegger, the newly elected rector of Freiburg University, very ostentatiously joined the

National Socialist German Workers Party” (1993:85).

This constant questioning and contradiction is replete throughout Being and Time and I include here two more example of this tendency: “Thus the fundamental ontological of Interpreting Being as such includes working out the Temporality of Being. In the exposition of the problematic of Temporality the question of the meaning of Being will first be concretely answered” (1967:40) as opposed to: “This cannot mean, however, that ‘Dasein’ is to be construed in terms of some concrete possible idea of existence. At the outset of our analysis it is particularly important that Dasein should not be Interpreted with the differentiated character [...] of some definite way existing, but that it should be uncovered [...] in the undifferentiated character which it has proximally and for the most part” (1967:69).

Heidegger explains this apparent structure explicitly at the beginning of Being and Time stating that: “Within the range of basic philosophical concepts — especially when we come to the concept of ‘Being’ — it is a dubious procedure to invoke self-evidence, even if the ‘self evident’ [...] is to become the sole explicit and abiding theme for one’s analytic — ‘the business of philosophers.’ By considering these prejudices, however, we have made plain not only that the question of Being lacks an answer, but that the question itself is obscure and without direction. So if it is to be revived, this means that we must first work out an adequate way of formulating it” (1967:24).

Although the essential ‘nimeness’ of death cannot be disputed, I would argue that nature of death is in many cases taken out of our hands by the violent or unthinking actions of ‘Others’ or ‘the they.’

Richard Polt explains the impossibility of a truly authentic Being using Heidegger’s own extravagant dress sense as an example: “Section 27 is known for its powerful writing. Here Heidegger claims that usually, one does not exist authentically: one does not truly own up to one’s own existence. Instead, one exists as das Man. Can I escape the ‘they’ by dressing against prevailing fashion, then? No — the ‘they’ is much more insidious than that, if I rebel by adopting a counterculture hairstyle, body markings and clothes, I am still basing my personal look on the ‘they’ — I still depend on the ‘they’ as a guideline (a negative guideline) for how I should behave. Furthermore, I am embracing a new ‘they’ — the counter—cultural ‘they.’ Often enough, ‘nonconformists’ are rigid conformists within their own subculture. It takes hard work to devise a truly individual way of dressing — such as Heidegger’s ‘existential outfit,’ which Karl Lowith perceived as an attempt to shock the ‘they’” (1999:62).

The demarcation between the early and mature Heidegger, the importance of his phenomenological deconstruction of metaphysics, and his recognition of this theoretical aпорia is expanded by Polt: “It is a rare thinker who can construct an elaborate set of interrelated analyses and a special vocabulary, and then manage to break through this structure in order to think anew. But Heidegger did exactly that. Writing Being and Time [...] may have allowed him to set aside an old set of concepts — or perhaps, his love of restless questioning led him to exert himself deliberately to cast off his old concepts. However this may be, in the late twenties we find him working towards fresh formulations and stressing new phenomenon [...] Heidegger begins to undergo a transformation that will turn our thinker into the so-called ‘later Heidegger’ or ‘Heidegger II.’ This transformation is usually known as the ‘turn’ or Kehre” (1999:117).
between rhetoric and logic, between what it manifestly means to say and what it is nonetheless conceptual oppositions, the taking apart of hierarchical systems of thought which can then be re-open the future itself” (2000:11).

happening today in different from itself: a logic of spectrality: a theoretical and practical parasitism or virology: what is what you think: the experience of the impossible: what remains to be thou-definition which, as you might be able to guess, does not come from a dictionary:


19 It is true that Heidegger remains unpopular because of his involvement with the Nazi party and is all too often overlooked, and we see that he barely rates a mention in Jonathan Culler’s On Deconstruction or even makes it into Diané Collinson’s list of Fifty Major Philosophers.

20 Richard Polt explains Heidegger’s use of the term discourse in Being and Time, before it became commonly used in contemporary theory: “speech acts and vocabularies and grammars — all of them elements of language — are based on an essential trait of Dasein’s Being, a trait that Heidegger calls discourse. Unless we grasp how we ourselves exist as discursive elements, we will never understand the nature of particular manifestations of this discursiveness, such as words, sentences and languages” (1999:74).

21 Stephen Mulhall explains the manner in which Heidegger approaches his defamiliarisation of ontology arguing that: “Heidegger does not […] regard the philosophical tradition purely as something constraining or distorting. What he inherits from the past, that which defines and delimits the possibilities with which he is faced in engaging with his fundamental question, is not simply to be rejected. After all, the complete and undiscriminating rejection of every possibility that this tradition offers would leave him with no orientation for his enquiry, with no possible way of carrying on his questioning […] Heidegger never claims that every contribution to this tradition was benighted; on the contrary he stresses the positive elements of relatively recent philosophical work” (1996:21). As we shall see the trap of the hermeneutic circle and the metaphysical nature of language, is further emboldened by Derrida.

22 In the ‘Translator’s Preface’ to Discourse on Thinking, Anderson and Freund explain this frustration and seeming rejection of his philosophical past and his own metaphysical concepts: “How does Heidegger lead us towards the transmutation of man he desires, if not by making extensive use of technical terminology as in his earlier works? He does it, in part, by using a language that is simple and has the flavour of the earth. He strives for simile and metaphor involving the soil and growth, and by this means he achieves a poetic tone. Not that his sentence structure or paragraph organization is poetic, for it is not; but phrases and words occurring in the larger context often evoke overtones of feeling associated with the land, with fields, and with what is the ground of things […] words are used with the directedness of reference which only poetic handling can achieve” (1966:14).

23 Safranski suggests that Heidegger himself was aware of the possibility of inauthentic Being on a cultural level in relation to the fervour that the German population felt toward Hitler and the Nazi Party before WWII. He explains that, when discussing the poetry of Holderlin, Heidegger believed that: “There are periods of history that favor such a Seyns-Bezug — such a ‘relation to being’ — and others that render it more difficult or even impossible. The ‘night of the gods,’ or, as Heidegger calls it, the ‘darkening of the world,’ engulfs entire epochs” (1999:286). Perhaps then we can view Heidegger’s exuberant involvement with the Nazi Party and his own fall from grace as an example of inauthentic Being, and WWII as such an example of this ‘darkening of the world.’

24 Christina Howells indicates the extent of his published works: “The extraordinary acceleration of Derrida’s publishing record is daunting as well as impressive. When I started thinking seriously about Derrida in 1980 he had published a dozen books, four in the 1960s and the rest in the seventies, as well, of course, numerous articles and essays. Reading the written corpus seemed a manageable goal. By 1990, when I first considered writing a book on Derrida, he had published another twenty. Nor could I anticipate that his output would further accelerate: at least another twenty books have appeared since 1990, three in the first three months of 1997, just as I imagined I was putting the final touches to my last chapter” (1999:3).

25 Nicholas Royle has fun with the difficulties in pinpointing a true conceptual understanding of deconstruction by contrasting his non-definition with that paragon of différence, the Oxford English Dictionary: “So here are a couple of dictionary-style definitions. First from the 1989 edition of the Oxford English Dictionary: deconstruction [f. DE + CONSTRUCTION] a. The action of undoing the construction of a thing. b. Philos. And Lit. Theory. A strategy of critical analysis associated with the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (b.1930), directed towards exposing unquestioned metaphysical assumptions and internal contradictions in philosophy and literary language. And here is a more recent definition which, as you might be able to guess, does not come from a dictionary: deconstruction n. not what you think: the experience of the impossible: what remains to be thought: a logic of destabilization always already on the move in ‘things in themselves:’ what makes every identity at once itself and different from itself: a logic of spectrality: a theoretical and practical parasitism or virology: what is happening today in what is called society, politics, diplomacy, economics, historical reality, and so on: the opening of the future itself” (2000:11).

26 Christopher Norris handily explains how deconstruction found its way into, and defamiliarised the philosophical tradition from within the margins: “What these consist of […] is the dismantling of conceptual oppositions, the taking apart of hierarchical systems of thought which can then be re-inscribed with a different order of textual signification. Or again: deconstruction is the vigilant seeking-out of those ‘aporias,’ blind-spots or moments of self-contradiction where a text involuntary betrays the tension between rhetoric and logic, between what it manifestly means to say and what it is nonetheless
constrained to mean. To ‘deconstruct’ a piece of writing is therefore to operate a kind of strategic reversal, seizing on precisely those unregarded details (causal metaphors, footnotes, incidental turns of argument) which are always, and necessarily, passed over by interpreters of a more orthodox persuasion. For it is here, in the margins of the text […] that deconstruction discovers those same unsettling forces at work” (1987:19).

27 Derrida explains the traditional view of consciousness as self-present in ‘Différance’ wherein he states that: “Most often in the very form of ‘meaning,’ consciousness in all its modifications is conceivable only as self-presence, a self-perception of presence. And what holds for consciousness also holds here for what is called subjective existence in general. Just as the category of subject is not and never has been conceivable without reference to presence as hypokeimenon or ousia, etc., so the subject as consciousness has never been able to be evinced otherwise than self-presence” (1996:147).

28 The manner that deconstruction is caught up in metaphysics is explained in Of Grammatology: “The movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures. Inhabiting them in a certain way, because one always inhabits, and all the more when one does not suspect it. Operating necessarily from inside, borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure, borrowing them structurally, that is to say without being able to isolate their elements and atoms, the enterprise of deconstruction always in a certain way falls prey to its own work” (1997:24).

29 Niall Lucy explains how the necessarily repeatable nature of the written word necessitates the loss of the certitude of truth or authorial intent: “In order to become significant, then, a mark must be repeatable. But to repeat it is also to alter it, by taking it out of one context into another. Strictly, then, repetition is impossible, since alteration must also occur whenever repetition takes place. However imperceptible, however seemingly incidental, a change takes place during every act of so-called repetition […] Anything that could be used to communicate must be iterable, able to be repeated and therefore altered, always already, from the beginning, at the first occasion of its use. Misrepresentation is never accidental, then — it is structural” (1995:24-26).

30 Norris argues that: “Far from standing out as a mere freakish episode, Plato’s treatment of writing in the Phaedrus sets a pattern for similar encounters down through the history of Western thought. It is this pattern that Derrida will trace so intently in the texts of that tradition, from, Plato to Kant, Hegel, Husserl” (1987:33-4).

31 For a full outline of Saussure’s linguistic approach to signs see his Course for General Linguistics and for Derrida’s deconstruction of the same, see ‘The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing’ and ‘Linguistics and Grammatology’ in Of Grammatology. In ‘Deconstruction as Criticism,’ Rodolphe Gasché indicates how Saussure undermined his own argument: “Saussure’s famous thesis of the arbitrariness of the sign that completely blurs the traditional opposition of speech and writing. Saussure excluded writing from language and chased it to its outer fringes because he considered it to be only an exterior reflection of the reality of language, that is, nothing but an image, a representation or a figuration” (1979:197).

32 True to Derrida’s anti-metaphysical position, and his belief in the arbitrary nature of the metaphysics of presence he is keen to point out that: “Différance is neither a word nor a concept” (1996:130). That is, the play of difference in the system of signs is an actual process, and as such différence simply exist as neither a word, nor a concept, for to be so would make this ineluctable process metaphysical.

33 Derrida explains the process of ‘play’ and the manner in which it undermines presence at length in ‘Structure Sign and Play’ wherein he states that: “Besides the tension between play and history, there is also the tension between play and presence. Play is the disruption of presence. The presence of an element is always a signifying and substitutive reference inscribed in a system of differences and the movement of a chain. Play is always play of absence and presence, but if it is to be thought radically, play must be conceived of before the alternative of presence and absence. Being must be conceived as presence or absence on the basis of the possibility of play and not the other way around” (1997:292).

34 In ‘Structure, Sign and Play’ Derrida explains the impact that the non-presence of the ‘transcendental signer’ has had on the self-present subject: “This was the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse — provided we can agree on this word — that is to say, in a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely” (1997:280).

35 The inappropriate manner in which deconstruction has been subsumed by theories of literary criticism is explained by Christopher Johnson who states that: “Though the literary critical conscription of ‘écriture’ has no doubt been of specific strategic use within the field of literary criticism itself, an unfortunate corollary of this conscription has been a refusal on the part of many philosophers to regard Derrida’s work as serious philosophy. The fact that Derrida’s own difficult style, combined with the modality of the initial assimilation of his work into academic institutions in Britain and the United States
Derrida and Wittgenstein, especially when we remember that in its wider implications the problem about hints, if any, as to how he will deal with this problem. In this respect there is a sharp contrast between Derrida’s reputation with philosophers has accordingly suffered” (1993:9). Rudolphe Gasché highlights the way in which the misuse of deconstruction ostensibly ignores the lessons in Derrida’s approach by failing to acknowledge the ontological origins of his neologisms, arguing that: “In fact, the unproblematized application of borrowed tools to the analysis of literary texts already proves the affinity of deconstructive and traditional criticism. Indeed, the newly fashionable a-theoretical stance which in the present configuration pretends to come to the rescue of literary, aesthetic, and ethical values is by its very definition not only violently theoretical, but this hypocritical innocence in matter of theory stems from its blindness and an ignorance of its own presuppositions that are in the end all dependent on various extra-literary disciplines such as psychology, history, and philosophical aesthetics. The origins of these disciplines in nineteenth-century philosophy are never admitted or made explicit” (1979:179).

In this extended footnote we observe the tendency of Derrida’s critics to rely on secondary sources, and see Habermas doing so when conflating Derrida’s philosophy with literary criticism: “Jonathan Culler recalls the strategic meaning of Derrida’s treatment of philosophical texts through literary criticism in order to suggest that, in turn, literary criticism treat literary texts also as philosophical texts” (1987:192). Howells, picks up on Habermas’ perfunctory dismissal of Derrida: “If Derrida seems imatical at first reading, it is much easier to dismiss him than to spend the immense amount of time required to learn to read and understand him. Hence even competent theorists like Habermas will resort to expository texts such as this one, or Culler’s, and attack them instead of the original […] because they are more interested in their own arguments than in the correctness of their reading of others. Misrepresentation of this kind probably occurs on a large scale all the time, but it is rarely analysed and responded to with such brilliance and scholarship as Derrida seems to be able to muster at any moment. Derrida’s intelligence is formidable: this is why it is vital to read and understand him, not merely dismiss him as obscurantist” (1999:71). In an example of his clever critical responses Derrida takes a sly swipe at Habermas in ‘An Interview with Derrida,’ from Le nouvel observateur, indicating that it is incorrect to carry out such critical reductions of his work, and implying that his texts are illusive because so too is language: “N.O.: In sum, then, to read you, one must have some notion not only of philosophy, but also of psychoanalysis, literature, history, linguistics, or the history of painting … J.D.: Above all, there is the potential movement of one text through others, and whether one wishes it or not, this is necessary — its a kind of chemistry, so to speak … N.O.: To read you, one must have read Derrida … J.D.: But that’s true for everyone! It is unwarranted to consider a course previously taken, a writing which is gradually confirmed itself, at least in part? How could one do otherwise? Nonetheless, it is interesting to undo, to disconfirm. I also try to begin, again, from the often difficult and dangerous notion of simplicity …” (1988:72).

A footnote on a footnote on ‘Signature, Event, Context:’ A prime example of the loss of Derrida’s playfulness is seen in Alan Bass’ translation of ‘Signature, Event, Context,’ wherein we find the following quizzical statement: “To conclude this very dry discourse,” accompanied by Footnote 15, reading: “TN. [Translator’s Note] Derrida’s word here is see, combing the initial letter of the three words that form his title, signature, event, context” (1972:329). Of course the fact that see is French for dry and an acronym for Derrida’s text does not translate playfully and require Bass’ footnote to become apparent indicating the ‘double play’ involved in any translation.

Two examples of this tendency to conflate Derrida and postmodernism can be seen firstly in Steven Connor’s Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction To Theories of the Contemporary wherein he describes Derrida’s Glas as having: “been taken as the object- or limit-text of postmodern criticism” (1989:215-216). And secondly by John Sturrock who deliberately avoids labelling Derrida a deconstructionist — seemingly to advance his own deterministic thesis regarding Derrida as the father of post-structuralism — stating that: “Derrida came to prominence in the late 1960s, when Structuralism was very much an intellectual fashion in France […] I choose here to consider Derrida as a post-Structuralist rather than by the alternative name of ‘deconstructionist,’ by which both he and his followers have tended to be called, because of the description of ‘post-Structuralism’ preserves within it the close relation to Structuralism on which Derrida depends for many of his effects. Post-Structuralism is not ‘post’ in the sense of having killed Structuralism off, it is ‘post’ only in the sense of coming after and of seeking to extend Structuralism in its rightful direction” (1986:136-37).

This concern regarding an apparent lack of content and certitude in Derrida’s work can even be seen in Newton Garver’s ‘Preface’ to Speech and Phenomena: “The other worrisome aspect of the present work is the uncertainty about how Derrida views logic, knowledge, and philosophy […] Derrida gives us few hints, if any, as to how he will deal with this problem. In this respect there is a sharp contrast between Derrida and Wittgenstein, especially when we remember that in its wider implications the problem about logic includes the question whether we can ever really know anything […] One hopes that Derrida,
having helped to shatter the reign of epistemology over our conception of language and metaphysics, will one day return to this problem” (1996:xxvii).

Howells explains the negative reception of deconstruction, and, in line with this thesis, takes a positive view of Derrida’s work, if one postulates the defamiliarisation of conceptual orders, and the impact this could have on the subject: “Deconstruction does arouse intense fear and hostility among many liberal or conservative thinkers precisely because it pulls the carpet out from under their feet: it questions the comfortable assumptions of common sense, and replaces them with the questions themselves, rather than a new set of answers; it dismantles the liberal consensus, shows up its illogicalities and simplifications, but it puts no new ideology in its place; indeed, it argues that there is no firm ground or foundation to our most cherished preconceptions. Derrida, and perhaps you and I, may find this exciting and liberating, we may delight in the attempt to found an ethics and politics in the shifting sands of a subject which is an effect not a cause, but the accusations of nihilism, however misplaced, are hardly surprising” (1999:142).

For a full account of these accusations see Jürgen Habermas’ ‘Excursus on Leveling the Genre Distinction between Philosophy and Literature,’ in which he constantly conflates deconstruction and literary criticism arguing against Derrida’s apparent ‘genre levelling.’

This view is expanded by Howells: “It means that philosophical texts are subject to the same kind of analysis as literary ones; to some eyes this may look suspiciously like treating the philosophical texts as if it were literature, but this suspicion is based on the assumption that philosophy is ‘above’ questions of its language” (1999:72). As such, it becomes apparent that many criticisms levelled at Derrida result from an inability to come to grips with his work, highlighting the impossibility of escaping ontological aspects of Western metaphysics, such as definitive genre boundaries.

For an overview Nicholas Royle outlines a list of Derrida’s literary interests ranging temporally from Rousseau to Coetzee. (2003:87).

Jonathan Culler carries out a critique of Derrida and deconstruction and uses the selfsame metaphorical style of writing apparently completely unaware of the irony: “deconstruction’s procedure is called ‘sawing off the branch on which one is sitting.’ This may be, in fact, an apt description of the activity, for though it is unusual and somewhat risky, it is manifestly something one can attempt. One can and may continue to sit on a branch while sawing it. There is no physical or moral obstacle if one is willing to risk the consequences. The question then becomes whether one will succeed in sawing it clear through, and where and how one might land. A difficult question: to answer one would need a comprehensive understanding of the entire situation — the resilience of the support, the efficacy of one’s tools, the shape of the terrain — and an ability to predict accurately the consequences of one’s work. If [this] seems foolhardy to men of common sense, it is not so for Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, and Derrida; for they suspect that if they fall there is no ‘ground’ to hit and that the most clear-sighted act may be a certain reckless sawing, calculated dismemberment or deconstruction of the great cathedral-like tree in which Man has taken shelter for millennia” (1993:149).
3.1.a. Friedrich Nietzsche and The Death of Metaphysics

In keeping with the increased literary focus of this thesis, the work of Friedrich Nietzsche can be seen to exemplify the manner in which various forms of writing, such as aphorisms, poetry and literature, can be read as valid explorations of the recurring crises of philosophy, culture and subjectivity. Furthermore, despite the controversy regarding his oeuvre, and the tendency for a continued misunderstanding of his key ideas due to inaccurate translations and the misappropriation of some of his more extreme ideas, his influence on succeeding theorists cannot be underestimated. With this in mind I will attempt to address these issues and highlight within his work a prescient expectation of the proposition of the a priori aporia of the diminished subject, while trying to avoid the inherent trap of context free misquotation given his metaphoric writing style. Once again this necessitates the deliberate choice of certain key themes that support my proposition, and for the purpose of this chapter I shall focus on Nietzsche’s ‘mature’ works beginning with the aphoristic Human, All Too Human (1878) ending with the autobiographical Ecce Homo (1888). In doing so I shall pay specific attention to his attack on the metaphysical traditions of philosophy and religion — or what he refers to as the ‘Will to Truth’ — the resultant defamiliarisation of the self-present subject in favour of the ‘free spirit’ or ‘overman,’ and the manner in which his writing style, its content, and its reception, illustrate the problematic and arbitrary nature of language and the ontological tradition.

3.1.b. The Antichrist, Ressentiment, ‘The Will to Truth’ and the restricted subject

The predilection of strength for questions for which no one today has the courage; the courage for the forbidden; the predestination to the labyrinth […] New ears for new music. New eyes for what is most distant. A new conscience for truths that have
so far remained mute. *And* the will to the economy of the great style: keeping our strength, our *enthusiasm* in harness. Reverence for oneself; love of oneself; unconditional freedom before oneself. Well then! Such men alone are my readers, my right readers, my predestined readers: what matter the *rest*? The rest — that is merely mankind. One must be above mankind in strength, in *loftiness* of soul — in contempt.


In keeping with this discussion of the diminished subject, Nietzsche’s perception of a crisis in culture and subjectivity — or ‘mankind’ — as the *raison d’être* for his philosophical investigations, continues this thematic, especially given that a view of the ‘eternal recurrence’ of such crises is replete in his writing. However, the manner in which he set about addressing the issues of his day are quite spectacular, and particularly controversial, given that his attack on oppressive discourses, and the limiting self-regulation of subjectivity, continues to reverberate through to contemporary ‘postmodern’ culture. In her ‘Introduction’ to *Beyond Good and Evil*, Helen Zimmerman indicates the extent of these crises, stating that: “In the increasingly prosperous, complacent, and mechanized atmosphere of the late-nineteenth-century Europe, Nietzsche railed against what he saw as the slide of Western culture into a morass of conformity, mediocrity, and bureaucratic specialization that stifled man’s higher creative impulses” (1997:vi-vii). Moreover, she indicates that for Nietzsche the greatest threat to mankind was Christian morality, explaining that in his view it:

[B]reeds a timorous retreat from life by postponing happiness and redemption to the next world. According to Nietzsche, this abnegation of the self in service of an abstract ideal […] suppresses the healthiest and most primal human instinct: the will to power, the lonely quest for mastery of life’s difficulties, the indefatigable striving that disdains the deadening narcotics of traditional morality and mass conformism (vii).

That is, for Nietzsche the predominance of metaphysical morality led to an abstinence of experience in favour of the redemption of the hereafter, leading him to identify with the Dionysian\(^1\) character of Greek tragedy that affirmed life through the acceptance of suffering and the endangerment of the self, rather than remaining subservient to metaphysical doctrines.
That subjectivity was being stifled both creatively and experientially by the blind acceptance of intangible metaphysical beliefs was to become one of the key focuses of Nietzsche’s work, and his view that Christian ascetic morality was predominantly responsible for this acquiescence and conformity of experience led to some of his most infamous, yet influential proclamations. However, his view of the crisis of subjectivity was not limited to Christian metaphysics but also to religious philosophy, explaining his disdain for this ‘remnant of Philosophy’ in *Beyond Good and Evil* stating that: “Philosophy reduced to ‘theory of knowledge,’ actually no more than a timid epochism and abstinence doctrine: a philosophy that does not even get over the threshold and painfully *denies* itself the right of entry — that is philosophy at its last gasp, an end, an agony, something that arouses pity. How could such a philosophy — *rule!*” (1977:42).

That is, this apparent crisis of subjectivity was the result of a desire for metaphysical certitude — what he referred to as ‘The Will to Truth’ — whereby philosophy become merely an arm of Christianity, embellishing and reinforcing the nihilistic doctrines of ascetic morality, and a belief in the transcendental self-present subject at the expense of the continued positive development of ‘mankind.’

Having arrived at the conclusion that the subject of his day was suffering from a crisis brought about by a nihilistic perspective of subjectivity based on the deferment of existence in favour of redemption, Nietzsche set about attacking the institution he believed was most responsible for mankind’s frustrations. He believed that by embracing the meaninglessness suffering of existence the subject could overcome the crises which afflicted it instead of wallowing in nihilistic fear, arguing that the Christian Church had commandeered this negative, yet *a priori*, aspect of being for its own ends. He explains in *On The Genealogy of Morals* that:

Apart from the ascetic ideal, man, the *animal* man, hitherto had no meaning. His existence on earth contained no goal; ‘why man at all?’ — was a question without an answer; the *will* for man and earth was lacking; behind every great human destiny there resounded as a refrain an even greater ‘In vain!’ *That* is the meaning of the
ascetic ideal: that something was lacking, that a tremendous chasm surrounded man — he did not know how to justify, to explain, to affirm himself, he suffered from the problem of his meaning. He also suffered otherwise, he was essentially a sickly animal: but it was not suffering itself that was his problem, it was a lack of an answer to the crying question ‘Why suffering? […] The meaningless of suffering, not suffering itself, was the curse which hitherto lay over mankind — and the ascetic ideal gave it meaning! (1977:162).

Arising from this meaningless suffering came a resentment towards life which was directed away from the dominant social discourses and back onto the individual in a process of Ressentiment. Nietzsche proposed that this was a way of managing ‘good’ and the ‘evil’ whereby the potential ‘evildoer’ was forced to internalise their frustration:

“I suffer: someone must be to blame for it” — thus thinks every sickly sheep. But his shepherd, the ascetic priest, tells him: ‘Quite so, my sheep! Someone must be to blame for it’ […] you alone are to blame for yourself! — This is brazen and false enough: but one thing at least is achieved by it, the direction of ressentiment is altered […] to render the sick to a certain degree harmless, to work the self-destruction of the incurable, to direct the ressentiment of the less afflicted sternly back upon themselves […] and in this way to exploit the bad instincts of all sufferers for the purpose of self-discipline, self-surveillance, and self-overcoming” (1989:128). Thus, the ascetic ideal utilises the frustration of the a priori meaninglessness of existence as a form of social and moral control, replacing the terror of being with the promise of redemption in the afterlife.³

Needless to say, his attack on Christianity caused consternation and outrage, yet as Walter Kaufmann explains in his ‘Introduction’ to the Genealogy, for Nietzsche:

“Resentment is reprehensible, but so is the failure to engage in the fight against infamy. It is only when the infamy to be crushed turns out to be Christianity that most readers recoil. But Nietzsche’s attack, of course, depends on his concept of Christianity and — as he himself insists — cannot be understood at all except as part of his campaign against resentment” (1989:208). That is, rather than simply carrying out an attack on ascetic morality, Nietzsche attempts to destroy the metaphysics of the ‘Will to Truth’ —
in a process of defamiliarisation akin to deconstruction — and create an awareness of
the arbitrary limitations placed on the subject with his vitriolic diatribes. Without doubt
the most controversial of Nietzsche’s attacks came with his proclamation that ‘God is
dead.’ However, in his ‘Preface’ to Human, All Too Human, he indicates that this view
was less about a nihilistic desire for the end of all morals, but rather an attempt to shift
the focus of philosophy away from the purely metaphysical and onto tangible physical
experience, stating that:

‘What’s that? Everything is only — human, all too human?’ With such a sigh one
comes from my writings, they say, with a kind of wariness and distrust even toward
morality, indeed tempted and encouraged in no small way to become the spokesman
for the worst things: might they perhaps be only the best slandered? My writings
have been called a School for Suspicion, even more for Contempt, fortunately also
for Courage and, in fact, for Daring. Truly, I myself do not believe that anyone has
ever looked into the world with such deep suspicion, and not only as an occasional
devil’s advocate, but every bit as much, to speak theologically, as an enemy and

That is, in order to question metaphysics one must necessarily doubt the existence of
God, and in The Antichrist he extrapolates this explaining that: “The Christian
conception of God […] is one of the most corrupt conceptions of God arrived at on
Earth […] God degenerated to the contradiction of life, instead of being its
transfiguration and eternal Yes! In God a declaration of hostility towards life, nature, the
will to life! God the formula for every calumny of ‘this world,’ for every lie about ‘the
next world!’ In God nothingness defied, the will to nothingness sanctified!” (1977:187).

Thus, for Nietzsche, the irony of the self-regulation of ascetic morality reaches its nadir,
for if one accepts that a belief in God is metaphysical then, ipso facto, one defers the
truth of the meaninglessness of human existence for the hope of redemption, or
‘nothingness.’ Therefore, Nietzsche’s anti-metaphysical position was geared toward
destroying the ideals and idols that restrict the creative development of the subject
through an a priori belief in nothing.
With this view we appreciate that Nietzsche’s vitriolic propositions diminish the security of the pure self-present subject of religious belief and transcendental philosophy, for as he explains in *The Antichrist*:

When one places life’s center of gravity not in the life but in the ‘beyond’ — *in nothingness* — one deprives life of its center of gravity altogether. The great lie of personal immortality destroys all reason, everything natural in the instincts […] That everyone as an ‘immortal soul’ has equal rank with everyone else, that in the totality of living beings the ‘salvation’ of every single individual may claim eternal significance, that little prigs and three-quarter madmen may have the conceit that the laws of nature are constantly broken for their sakes — such an intensification of every kind of selfishness into the infinite, into the *impertinent*, cannot be branded with too much contempt (1954:618-9).

Thus, Nietzsche argues that the Christian subject has no factual basis, leaving it alone and faced with being ‘human, all too human,’ and embracing the meaninglessness of existence, although we shall see that rather than viewing the subject free of metaphysics in negative terms, Nietzsche had a far more optimistic outlook.

The awareness that his undertaking acted as a break with the tradition of ascetic moral belief and metaphysical philosophy was not lost on the somewhat immodest Nietzsche, who explained in the *Genealogy*: “Let us articulate this *new demand*: we need a *critique* of moral values, *the values of these values themselves must be called into question* — and for that there is needed a knowledge of the conditions and circumstances in which they grew, under which they evolved and changed (morality as consequence, as symptom, as mask, as tartufferie, as illness, as misunderstanding; but also morality as a cause, as a remedy, as stimulant, as restraint, as poison), a knowledge of a kind that has never existed or even been desired” (1989:20). That Nietzsche’s approach can be seen as a form of proto-deconstruction that marked a break with tradition cannot be doubted, with many of his key ideas expanded by Heidegger and Derrida, while his genealogical method was used by Foucault. However, despite his desire to deconstruct *a priori* beliefs, he also recognised the danger of substituting his own metaphysical ideals, something he makes apparent in the *Genealogy*, when he asks:
‘What are you really doing, erecting an ideal or knocking one down?’ I may perhaps be asked. But have you ever asked yourselves sufficiently how much the erection of every ideal on earth has cost? How much reality has had to be misunderstood and slandered, how many lies have had to be sanctified, how many consciences disturbed, how much ‘God’ sacrificed every time? If a temple is to be erected a temple must be destroyed: that is the law — let anyone who can show me a case in which it is not fulfilled! (95).

That is, Nietzsche’s attempt to defamiliarise the monolithic metaphysical assumptions of his day were guarded, and his ideas speculative rather than ideal. This fantastical desire to postulate rather than dictate can be seen in ‘Aphorism 52’ of Human, All Too Human, entitled ‘The cyclops of culture’ wherein he argues that: “When we behold those deeply-furrowed hollows in which glaciers have lain, we think it hardly possible that a time will come when a wooded, grassy valley, watered by streams, will spread itself out upon the same spot. So it is, too, in the history of mankind: the most savage forces beat a path, and are mainly destructive; but their work was nonetheless necessary, in order that later a gentler civilization might raise its house. The frightful energies — those which are called evil — are those cyclopean architects and road-makers of humanity” (1977:80). Therefore, despite an overwhelming desire to destroy the tradition of the ‘Will to Truth’ Nietzsche did so without an ideal outcome, this ‘deconstruction’ was not carried out in order to replace any given metaphysical idea with an ideal or idol of his own, but rather — much like the inhospitable glacial valley — to simply see what would arise from its destruction.

3.1.c. Free Spirits, Overman and Übermensch — The Terror of Freedom

And now, after having been thus under way for a long time, we argonauts of the ideal, braver perhaps than is prudent and often enough shipwrecked and come to grief but, as said, healthier than others would like us to be, dangerous healthy, healthy again and again — it seems to us as if we have, as a reward, a yet undiscovered country before us whose boundaries none have ever seen, a land beyond all known lands and corners of the ideal, a world so over-full of the beautiful, strange, questionable, terrible and divine that our curiosity and our thirst for possession are both besides themselves — so that nothing can any longer satisfy us! How, after such prospects and with such a ravenous hunger in conscience and knowledge, could we remain content with the man of the present? — Friedrich Nietzsche, ‘Aphorism 382’ in The Gay Science (1977:210).
Having outlined Nietzsche’s defamiliarisation of the metaphysics of ascetic morality, it is important to note that he was particularly scathing of the manner in which the philosophical tradition had created an artificial perspective of the subject as fixed and stable, explaining in *Twilight of the Idols* that: “They think that they show their respect for a subject when they de-historicize it, *sub specie aeterni* — when they turn it into a mummy. All that philosophers have handled for thousands of years have been concept-mummies: nothing real escapes their grasp alive. When these honorable idolators of concepts worship something, they kill and stuff it; they threaten the life of everything they worship. Death, change, old-age, as well as procreation and growth, are to their minds objections — even refutations” (1954:479). As already seen with the transcendental subject of Christianity, Nietzsche viewed the self-present subject of philosophy as a conceptual artifice that had been ‘embalmed,’ thus ‘burying’ possible alternative expressions of subjectivity to those of dominant cultural discourses.

That Nietzsche’s anti-metaphysical perspective of subjectivity was influenced by the more radical scientific thinkers of his day such as Charles Darwin, is explained by R.J. Hollingdale, in his ‘Introduction’ to *A Nietzsche Reader*:

I see his distinctive contribution to European thought to lie in his perception that Western man was facing a radical change in his relationship with ‘truth:’ a change that would come about when he recognized that the metaphysical, religious, moral and rational truths which were formerly both backbone and substance of the Western tradition were in fact errors. This conclusion is, or will be, a consequence of the pretensions of such truths to absoluteness, a pretension which is being undercut by the evolutionism of Hegel and Darwin. Modern man is acquiring the idea of ‘becoming’ as his ruling idea: and if everything evolves, then ‘truth,’ too, evolves — so that, if ‘truth’ is synonymous with absolute truth true for all time and for everybody, a loss of belief in the truth of truth is on the way. ‘Everything evolves’ will come to mean ‘nothing is true’ (1977:9).

Although, the idea that ‘nothing is true’ has taken on a life of its own and tarred Nietzsche with the brush of anti-humanism and nihilism, it is apparent that once he destroyed the God of metaphysics, the conceptual base of the philosophy needed to be called into question. In ‘Aphorism 16’ of *Human, All Too Human*, he explains that this
dependence on metaphysics has allowed philosophers and logicians to: “overlook the possibility that that painting [sic] — that which to us men means life and experience — has gradually evolved, indeed is still evolving, and therefore should not be considered a fixed quantity, on which basis a conclusion about the creator (the sufficient reason) may be made, or even rejected” (1994:23). That is, rather than seeing the subject as fixed in time and space, suffocated by the concepts of philosophy and the nihilism of ascetic moral law, Nietzsche indicates that this seemingly a priori truth is in fact an error, that when recognised empowers and emancipates the subject.

Therefore, although he ‘paints’ a positive picture of the non-present subject free of metaphysics, it still remains vulnerable to the condition of the possibility of change, yet despite claims to the contrary Nietzsche once again resisted the temptation to create an ideal metaphysical outcome from this new perspective of an evolving subject. Instead, he continued to postulate rather than predict, a tendency made clear in ‘Aphorism 638’— the very last of Human, All Too Human:

He who has come only in part to a freedom of reason cannot feel on earth otherwise than as a wanderer — though not as a traveler towards a final goal, for this does not exist. But he does want to observe, and keep his eye open for everything that actually occurs in the world; therefore he must not attach his heart too firmly to any individual thing; there must be something wandering within him, which takes its joy in change and transitoriness (1994:266-7).

That the joy of the freedom from metaphysics is so palpable in Nietzsche’s writing is ironic when one considers his links to the so-called ‘postmodern crisis,’ and given that his attack was born from a perceived pre-modernist crisis! He explains this joy in The Gay Science stating that: “We philosophers and ‘free spirits’ in fact feel at the news that the ‘old God is dead’ as if illuminated by a new dawn; our heart overflows with gratitude, astonishment, presentiment, expectation — at last the horizon seems to us again free, even if it is not too bright, at last our ships can be put out again, no matter what the danger, every daring venture of knowledge is again permitted, the sea, our sea again lies there open before us, perhaps there has never yet been such an ‘open sea’”
(1977:209-10). Thus, having indicated the manner that Nietzsche’s attack on traditional metaphysics at once diminished and emboldened the subject, I shall now investigate his postulated ‘free spirit’ and the controversy surrounding this Übermenschen.

Despite Nietzsche’s repeated claims that the subject unshackled from metaphysics would be free to explore new horizons and continue to evolve, he was also aware of certain conceptual and contextual limitations to this development. Furthermore, in line with his interest in evolutionary theory, at no time did he posit a metaphysical endpoint for this new subject, although this did not prevent him investigating certain fantastical possible outcomes of the terror of freedom. Given the deterioration of his mental health — possibly as a result of syphilis — it is no surprise that Nietzsche’s postulations took on a certain grandiose nature, something that was not lost on subsequent readers. In Human, All Too Human, he brings forth the concept of the ‘free spirit,’ an idea that he would continue to develop as the ‘higher man,’ ‘overman’ and ‘Übermensch,’ explaining in Ecce Homo that:

*Human, All-Too-Human* is the monument of a crisis. It is subtitled ‘A Book for Free Spirits.’ Almost every sentence marks some victory — here I liberated myself from what in my nature did not belong to me. Idealism, for example; the title means: ‘where you see ideal things, I see what it is — human, alas, all-too-human’ — I know man better. The term ‘free spirit’ here is not to be understood in any other sense; it means a spirit that has become free, that has again taken possession of itself (1989:283).

Despite coining the term ‘free spirit’ Nietzsche is at pains to distance himself from metaphysical ideals indicating that it is in fact metaphysics that the spirit must escape. Furthermore, this crisis was not limited to the subject of ascetic moral laws and metaphysical philosophy it also represents Nietzsche’s famous break with his idol, composer Richard Wagner, and the limitations of the philosophical tradition following his resignation from Basel University due to ill health. Therefore, the ‘free spirit' contextually represents the freedom Nietzsche achieved by distancing himself from the unpalatable anti-Semitic nationalism of Wagner, and the dominant dictates of accepted
philosophical discourse. Thus, it is with certain irony — given Nietzsche’s repeated
denunciation of metaphysics — that his ideas soon became the ideals of many, and the
‘free spirit’ a popularised idol and an apparent evolutionary certainty.

In his ‘Introduction’ to Ecce Homo, Walter Kaufmann explains that this irony was
not lost on Nietzsche stating that we: “hear the anguished cry of one who sees —
foresees — himself mistaken for a writer he is not: for an apostle of military power and
empire, a nationalist, and even a racist. In order to define himself emphatically,
Nietzsche underlines (too often) and shrieks — to no avail. Those who construe the
overman in evolutionary terms he calls ‘oxen’ — in vain” (1989:206). That is, despite
repeated protestations, Nietzsche’s idea of the ‘free spirit’ quickly became viewed as a
metaphysical ideal, yet he explains in Human, All Too Human that this is a ‘relative
concept,’ and in the Genealogy questions if this new subject is “even possible today”
(1989:96), going on to explain the hypothetical nature of the concept stating:

But some day, in a stronger age than this decaying, self-doubting present, he must
yet come to us, the redeeming man of great love and contempt, the creative spirit
whose compelling strength will not let him rest in any aloofness or any beyond,
whose isolation is misunderstood by the people as if it were a flight from reality —
while it is only his absorption, immersion, penetration into reality, so that, when he
one day emerges again into the light, he may bring home the redemption of this
reality: its redemption from the curse that the hitherto reigning ideal has lain upon it.
This man of the future, who will redeem us not only from the hitherto reigning ideal
but also from that which was bound to grow out of it, the great nausea, the will to
nothingness, nihilism; this bell-stroke of noon and of the great decision that liberates
the will again and restores its goal to the earth and his hope to man; this Antichrist
and antinihilist; this victor over God and nothingness — he must come one day (96).

As such, Nietzsche shows great prescience when repeatedly arguing that the ‘free spirit’
was merely conceptual and not a metaphysical certitude, indicating that he was aware
that the tendency to embrace new ideal and idols would not be overcome quickly, and
probably not in his own time. Thus, he continued to distance himself from metaphysics
despite acknowledging that his work would likely be subsumed by determinism as a
result of context free quotation, a view of his aphorisms as free standing, and as we
shall see, due to the conceptual limitations of an inherited philosophical tradition.
Although Nietzsche was consistent in his attack on metaphysics, his perspective was one based more on defamiliarisation rather than destruction — that in many ways represents a form of proto-deconstruction — and included an awareness of the difficulties in escaping those metaphysical concepts deeply entrenched in everyday language. In *The Twilight of the Idols* he indicates the limitations of both the ‘hermeneutic circle’ and the ‘metaphysics of language’ stating that: “‘Reason’ in language — oh, what an old deceptive female she is! I am afraid we are not rid of God because we still have faith in grammar” (1954:483). While in his *Assorted Opinions and Maxims* — the first supplement to *Human, All Too Human* — he arrived at the startling conclusion that rather than destroying the tradition of metaphysical philosophy it still retained value, stating in the ‘Error of philosophers,’ that: “The philosopher believes that the value of his philosophy lies in the whole, in the building: posterity discovers it in the bricks with which he built and which are then often used again for better building: in fact, that is to say, that that [sic] the building can be destroyed and nonetheless posses value as material” (1977:33). Thus, showing an awareness normally associated with contemporary philosophical theory, Nietzsche indicates the impossibility of escaping the ontology of metaphysics, seeing such concepts as necessary tools for his attack on this arbitrary tradition and for the further development of the subject, for if one destroys a temple one need not necessarily use the materials to build another!

The difficulties faced in overcoming metaphysics were not simply confined to the rational in the form of conceptual and linguistic constraints, but also included the irrational regression of the ‘free spirit’ with the realisation of the terror of freedom and the meaninglessness of existence. He explains this in ‘New struggles,’ ‘Aphorism 108’ of *The Gay Science*, announcing that: “After Buddha was dead, his shadow was for centuries still pointed out in a cave — an immense, frightful shadow. God is dead: but, men being what they are, perhaps there will for millennia still be caves in which his
shadow is pointed out. — And we — we still have to conquer his shadow too!” (1977:206-7). That is, despite proclaiming the death of God, he believed it likely that this tradition of worship and idolatry would be hard to vanquish. Furthermore, in *Human, All Too Human*, we see the newly released ‘free spirit’ falling into old habits wherein ‘Aphorism 99,’ entitled ‘Art makes the thinker’s heart heavy,’ he states:

How strong the metaphysical need is, and how hard nature makes it to bid it a final farewell, can be seen from the fact that even when the free spirit has divested himself of everything metaphysical the highest effects of art can easily set the metaphysical strings, which have long been silent or indeed snapped apart, vibrating in sympathy. […] If he becomes aware of being in this condition he feels a profound stab in the heart and sighs for the man who will lead him back to his lost love, whether she be called religion or metaphysics. It is in such moments that his intellectual probity is put to the test (1977:126).

That is, the metaphysical abounds in art as in all culture, and faced with the terror of existence even the ‘free spirit’ will pine for the security of the metaphysics of comfort in a manner not unlike certain responses to the apparent ‘postmodern condition.’

3.1.d. Misrepresenting Nietzsche — Language, literature and philosophy

语言作为一科学的尝试。—— 语言的意为在于，使人类在语言中建立一个与世界独立的世界，它被设立得如此稳固，以至于可以提升它，使自己成为世界的主宰。这在很大程度上是建立在人类对事物的概念和名称的信念上，即 eternae veritates，他认为这是他所拥有的一种骄傲，即他把自己提升到动物之上：他真的认为在语言中他拥有对世界的知识。语言的雕塑者并不是如此谦虚，他认为他只是在给事物命名，他设想的是通过语言来表达对事物的最高知识；语言是，事实上，科学的最初形式。在这里，这也是信念，即真理已找到的原因，通过它，最强大的力量已经流过。非常令人遗憾的是，它使人们在语言中成为他们所信仰的错误。—— 弗里德里希·尼采，‘Aphorism 11’ in *Human, All Too Human* (1977:55-56).

Having explored the manner in which Nietzsche diminished the ideal metaphysical self-present subject, I shall discuss how his particular writing style blurred the ago-old distinctions between the literary and the philosophical. Having freed himself from the restrictive environment of Basel University, Nietzsche fully embraced an aphoristic form of writing, explaining in his ‘Preface’ to the *Genealogy* that: “An aphorism,
properly stamped and moulded, has not been ‘deciphered’ when it has simply been read; one has then rather to begin its exegesis, for which is required an art of exegesis. […]

To be sure, to practise reading as an art in this fashion one thing above all is needed, precisely the thing which has nowadays been most thoroughly unlearned — and that is why it will be some time before my writings are ‘readable’ — a thing for which one must be almost a cow and in any event not a ‘modern man:’ rumination’ (1977:20).

Thus, for Nietzsche the aphorism was, to begin with at least, the perfect medium for his anti-metaphysical perspective, for much like Barthes’ ‘readerly text’ it was open to interpretation and designed to make the reader ‘ruminate’ as he suggested.

Following the completion of *Human, All Too Human* Nietzsche expanded his writing style further to include poetry, and in her ‘Introduction’ to that text, Marion Faber acknowledges the importance of the literary arguing that although these poems are: “flawed as art, they do help to indicate the other fundamental philosophical position revealed by Nietzsche’s new style. His blend of verse, pathos, and scientific exposition demonstrates his rejection of the idea that the work of a philosopher must be to construct a system to explain the world. Unlike his predecessors Kant and Schopenhauer, Nietzsche follows the fundamental tenet, evident already here, that ‘everything has evolved’ […] that truth — or better, truths — are therefore relative, shifting, never absolute. Given this insight, the aphorism, which allows for a loosely organized, shifting whole containing specific ideas but no iron-clad explanation for everything, constitutes the style that best represents his philosophy” (1994:xiii-xiv). As such, Nietzsche acknowledged that any defamiliarisation of metaphysical philosophy would still be constrained by conceptual limitations, and he saw a conjoining of art and philosophy as the medium by which to overcome this.

The fact that Nietzsche questioned the dominant discourses of his day, yet left the reader without the metaphysical certitude they had come to expect, created problems of
its own. In his ‘Introduction’ to the *Genealogy* Walter Kaufmann explains that: “Nietzsche had an almost pathological weakness for one particular kind of ambiguity, which, to be sure, is not irremediable: he loved words and phrases that meant one thing out of context and almost the opposite in the context he gives them. He loved language as poets do and relished these ‘revaluations.’ All of them involve a double meaning, one exoteric and one esoteric, one — to put it crudely — wrong, and the other right. The former is bound to lead astray hasty readers, browsers, and that rapidly growing curse of our time — the non-readers who do not realize that galloping consumption is a disease” (1989:6). If Nietzsche hoped to defamiliarise metaphysical presumptions, and redefine the acceptable discourses of philosophical discussion, then he succeeded. However, his anti-metaphysical position, non-committal aphoristic approach, and difficult to translate word-play, all reiterated the metaphysical arbitrariness of language, something that left his work open to some not so ‘free spirits’ to draw their own deterministic and controversial conclusions.9

Coupled with the obtuse nature of Nietzsche’s aphoristic writing, the fact that his works only achieved fame after the onset of insanity simply added to a propensity to misinterpret his work. Furthermore, once his sister — who previously gave him little encouragement — took charge of his estate and actively promoted his work, he also became vulnerable to exploitation. In his ‘Introduction’ to *Ecce Homo*, Kaufmann indicates the irony of this situation stating that: “The first section of the Preface ends: ‘Above all, do not mistake me for someone else!’ He underlined his cry — but soon his sister imposed her exceedingly unsubtle notion of hero and prophet on a mindless invalid — and in her sign he triumphed. That was but the beginning. Far worse mischief followed. Nietzsche’s voice was drowned out as misinterpretations that he had explicitly repudiated with much wit and malice were accepted and repeated […] until most readers knew what to expect before they read Nietzsche, and so read nothing but
what they had long expected” (1989:204). Under the supposed aegis of his sister, both Nietzsche and his writing underwent an extreme ‘make-over,’ being transformed in paper, oil and bronze, from a short and sickly individual into a wildly moustachioed, handsomely stern Übermensch — very much ‘someone else’ indeed!

That questionable interpretations of Nietzsche’s works — especially those of the Nazis — were the result of his sister’s meddling is explained by Kaufmann: “Nietzsche’s sister had mocked her brother’s claims to fame, but then, switching to his cause after her husband’s suicide, she took private lessons in Nietzsche’s philosophy from Rudolph Steiner10 [...] Soon Steiner gave her up as simply incapable of understanding Nietzsche. Meanwhile she became her brother’s official exegete and biographer, tampered with his letters — and was taken seriously by almost everyone. And who was not taken seriously? Even the most unscrupulous Nazi interpretations were taken seriously not only inside Germany, but a host of foreign scholars who did not bother to check Nazi quotations” (1989:204-5). That is, although Nietzsche’s vehement attacks on all metaphysical conventions saw him take exception to the likes of both the Semites and the British people, a close reading of his work finds him equally, if not more, critical toward Christianity, Buddhism and German Nationalism, as seen in Nietzsche contra Wagner. As Kaufmann explains in The Portable Nietzsche: “no other German writer of equal stature has been so thoroughly opposed to all proto-nazism [...] If some Nazi writers cited him nevertheless, it was at the price of incredible misquotation and exegetical acrobatics, which defy comparison with all the similar devices that Nietzsche himself castigated in the name of the philological conscience” (1954:14). It is ironic that, despite his best intentions, and constant clarification, Nietzsche was transformed into the ideal of a regime with the worst of intentions, and out of the Great Depression he emerged as the new idol of nationalistic Germany in the form of Nazism. As he cautiously explains in his ‘Preface’ to Ecce Homo: “The last
thing I should promise would be to ‘improve’ mankind. No new idols are erected by me; let the old ones learn what feet of clay mean. Overthrowing idols (my word for ‘ideals’) — that comes closer to being part of my craft. One has deprived reality of its value, its meaning, its truthfulness, to precisely the extent to which one has mendaciously invented an ideal world” (1989:217-8). Therefore, Nietzsche can be seen to best exemplify his own philosophical position, for as the ‘free spirit’ released from metaphysics became the worst type of totalitarian ‘mankind,’ he in turn became the centre of a new and terrifying form of idolatry in a less than ideal world.11

3.1.e. Nietzsche and Zarathustra — Dangerous literature and Prescience

_Dangerous books._ — Somebody remarked: ‘I can tell by my own reaction to it that this book is harmful.’ But let him only wait and perhaps one day he will admit to himself that this same book has done him a great service by bringing out the hidden sickness of his heart and making it visible. — Altered opinions do not alter a man’s character (or do so very little); but they do illuminate individual aspects of the constellation of his personality which within a different constellation of opinions had hitherto remained dark and unrecognizable.


I know my fate. One day my name will be associated with the memory of something tremendous — of a crisis without equal on earth, the most profound collision of conscience, a decision that was conjured up against everything that had been believed, demanded, hallowed so far. I am no man, I am dynamite.


Finally then, it is apparent that not only does Nietzsche reiterate the proposition of the _a priori_ diminished subject, and the inappropriate demarcation between literature and philosophy arising from the ‘wrong turn,’ there also exists a certain prescience regarding the possible impact of his work and the resultant crisis of determinism. Certainly, the reception of his two most famous books, _Beyond Good and Evil_ and _Thus Spoke Zarathustra_, clearly exemplify this point, for in the appropriately immodest titled ‘Why I write such excellent books’ from _Ecce Homo_, Nietzsche discusses their negative critical reception:

[A] professor of Berlin University kindly gave me to understand that I really ought to avail myself to a different form: no one read stuff like mine [...] An essay of Dr. V.
Widmann in the Bund on Beyond Good and Evil under the title ‘Nietzsche’s Dangerous Book,’ and a general report on my books as a whole on the part of Herr Karl Spitteler, also in the Bund, constitute a maximum in my life — of what I care not to say [...] The latter, for example dealt with my Zarathustra as an advanced exercise in style, with the request that I might later try to provide some content; Dr Widmann expressed his respect for the courage with which I strive to abolish all decent feelings (1977:22).

Even in his day, these responses reflect a similar attitude to the so-called ‘postmodern’ text being viewed as counter discursive and nihilistic. In the Genealogy he goes on to explain that: “I have no doubt for what sole purpose modern books (if they last, which we fortunately have little reason to fear, and if there will one day be a posterity with a more severe, harder, healthier taste) — for what purpose everything modern will serve this posterity: as an emetic” (1989:137). As such, it is possible to draw comparisons between the negative reception of Nietzsche’s ‘modern text’ and that of certain contemporary texts that have elicited vehement responses due to their defamiliarisation of conventions, extreme fictionalised expressions of subjectivity, and attempts to release the subject from the constraints of metaphysical discourses.

Not only is it possible to compare the notion of Nietzsche ‘dangerous book’ with negative views of the ‘postmodern’ text, but one could also argue that his perspective of a crisis born out of the death of God, and the end of the ‘Will to truth,’ is predictive of the ‘postmodern condition.’ Once again sounding the klaxons of concern while deconstructing the a priori tradition of metaphysics in ‘Disbelief in the ‘monumentum aere perennius’ Aphorism 22’ of Human, All Too Human, he cautions that: “One crucial disadvantage about the end of metaphysical views is that the individual looks his own short life span too squarely in the eye and feels no strong incentives to build on enduring institutions, designed for the ages. He wants to pick the fruit from the trees he has planted himself, and therefore no longer likes to plant those trees which require regular care over centuries, trees that are destined to overshadow long successions of generations” (1994:28). While in Twilight of the Idols he continues to deconstruct his
own position positing that: “The whole of the West no longer possesses the instincts out of which institutions grow, out of which a future grows: perhaps nothing antagonizes its ‘modern spirit’ so much. One lives for the day, one lives very fast, one lives very irresponsibly: precisely this is called ‘freedom’” (1954:543). In a self-awareness that undermines the multitude of negative interpretations of his work, with these two quotations Nietzsche not only casts doubt over the effectiveness of his work, but presciently hypotheses something akin to the ‘postmodern condition,’ although in many ways he indicates that this crisis of subjectivity rather than being a case of ‘eternal recurrence,’ is simply eternal.13

Finally then, and yet another nail in the coffin of the ‘dangerous book’ and the fight against the metaphysics of presence, Nietzsche indicates that regression is also an aspect of eternal recurrence, explaining in ‘Whispered to the conservatives,’ ‘Aphorism 43’ of Twilight of the Idols, that:

What is not known formerly, what is known, or might be known, today, a reversion, a return in any sense or degree is simply not possible. We physiologists know that. Yet all priests and moralists have believed the opposite — they wanted to take mankind back, to screw it back, to a former measure of virtue. Morality was always a bed of Procrustes. Even the politicians have aped the preachers of virtue at this point: today too there are still parties whose dream it is that all things must walk backwards like crabs (1954:546–7).

That is, Nietzsche’s view of the possible outcome of the end of metaphysics is something that parallels the rise of conservative right wing fundamental Christianity in the contemporary political landscape — that which attempts to counter the ‘free spirit’ by reinstating metaphysics to its right-ful place. Elsewhere in Twilight of the Idols, in ‘The error of free will’ Nietzsche’s view of the future following ‘the death of God’ and the ‘Will to truth’ takes on an eerie verisimilitude in relation to the ‘postmodern condition’ and the ‘new world order,’ wherein he states that: “Today […] we immoralists are trying with all our strength to take the concept of guilt and the concept of punishment out of the world again, and to cleanse psychology, history, nature, and
social institutions and sanctions of them, there is in our eyes no more radical opposition than that of the theologians, who continue with the concept of a ‘moral world-order’ to infect the innocence of becoming by means of ‘punishment’ and ‘guilt.’ Christianity is a metaphysics of the hangman” (1954:500). Indeed!

3.2.a. Sartre, Philosophy, Literature and The Diminished Subject

The inclusion of Jean-Paul Sartre in this thesis is not simply because his existential theories continue the anti-metaphysical postulations of Nietzsche, Husserl and Heidegger, but also due to the influence of literature on his philosophy, and vice versa. Furthermore, it is my belief that his view of subjectivity not only indicates a view of the subject as diminished, but that aspects of his life — such as his fall from favour and the subsequent critical treatment of his oeuvre — indicate a far-reaching crisis in both subjectivity and theory. Not only was his creative output prodigious, it was constantly evolving, and as such this section will be divided roughly into two parts. Firstly, I shall discuss the key aspects of Being and Nothingness that continue this teleology of the diminished subject, while secondly, I shall focus on his literary and ficto-critical output — beginning with Nausea and ending with his faux-autobiography Words — including pertinent insights into the fascinating life of this philosopher and writer.

3.2.b. Being and Nothingness — Sartre’s Diminished Existential Subject

Broadly speaking, it is not fear of man that we should desire to see diminished; for this fear compels the strong to be strong, and occasionally terrible — it maintains the well-constituted type of man. What is to be feared, what has a more calamitous effect than any other calamity, is that man should inspire not profound fear but profound nausea; also not great fear but great pity. Suppose these two were one day to unite, they would inevitably beget one of the uncanniest monsters: the ‘last will’ of man, his will to nothingness, nihilism […] The sick are man’s greatest danger; not the evil, not the ‘beast of prey.’ Those who are failures from the start, downtrodden, crushed — it is they, the weakest, who must undermine life among men, who call into question and poison most dangerously our trust in life, in man, and in ourselves. Where does one not encounter that veiled glance which burdens one with a profound sadness, that inward-turned glance of the born failure which betrays how such a man speaks to himself — that glance which is a sigh! ‘If only I were someone else,’ sighs
this glance: ‘but there is no hope of that. I am who I am: how could I ever get free of myself? And yet — I am sick of myself!’

Although Jean-Paul Sartre is known principally as an exponent of existentialism, he also referred to his work as existential psychoanalysis and existential phenomenology, thus expressing the importance of psychology, Nietzschean proto-existentialism, and phenomenology to the development of his theories. In his early work at least, Sartre appears to continuing a perceived teleology of the diminished subject, beginning with his reworking Freud’s concepts of the conscious and unconscious, and his measured appropriation of the phenomenological approaches of Husserl and Heidegger that attempted to avoid their slip into metaphysics.¹⁴ As René Lafarge explains in Sartre: His Philosophy he: “belongs to a tradition which shuns the abstract as much as it possibly can, and tries to remain glued to the real. He did not wish to build a system, but rather, to unveil the most intimate and most mysterious aspects of existence. For when he spoke of existence, it was of human existence he spoke, the only one that exists in his view” (1970:2-3). That is, while wishing to understand the human condition,¹⁵ Sartre was at pains to avoid metaphysical postulations, although as we have already seen this is never entirely possible.

The extent that Sartre’s existential approach was determinedly anti-metaphysical, yet has not been read as such, is made apparent by Hazel Barnes in the ‘Translator’s Introduction’ to Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology, for when emphasising this often overlooked subtitle she explains that:

Mistakes are often made by those who would treat the work as a metaphysics. Sartre states clearly his distinction between the two: Ontology studies ‘the structures of being of the existent taken as a totality;’ it describes the conditions under which there may be a world, human reality, etc. It answers the questions ‘How?’ or ‘What?’ and is description rather than explanation. For this reason it can state positively. Metaphysics, on the other hand, is concerned with origins and seeks to explain why there is this particular world. But since such explanations seek to go behind the Being which they must presuppose, they can only be hypotheses. Sartre does not disapprove of metaphysical attempts, but he noticeable refrains from engaging in them (1956:xliii).
Sartre was not interested in extrapolating the various metaphysical postulations of either his predecessors or his contemporaries, but rather investigated the subject released from the deterministic dictates of traditional philosophy and religious belief. In *Existentialism and Humanism* he famously clarifies the confusion regarding his position stating that: “The question is only complicated because there are two kinds of existentialists. There are, on the one hand, the Christians [...] and on the other the existential atheists, among whom we must place Heidegger as well as French existentialists and myself. What they have in common is simply the fact that they believe that existence comes before essence — or, if you will, that we must begin from the subjective” (1975:26). That is, following the ‘death of God,’ and upholding anti-metaphysical perspective of subjectivity that denied any inherent ‘human nature’ or ‘essence,’ Sartre focused on the tangible existence of Being-in-the-world, while attempting to avoid speculative hypotheses.

That Sartre held an *a priori* perspective of subjectivity as diminished is explained by Christina Howells in ‘Sartre and the deconstruction of the subject,’ wherein she states: “Sartre was one of the first French philosophers to think through some of the implications of what has been called the ‘divided subject’ (or the ‘split subject’ for Lacanians)” (1992:326). Although greatly influenced by the psychoanalytical division of self-present consciousness, he still had difficulties with its inherent metaphysics, explaining in *Being and Nothingness* that: “Psychoanalysis has not gained anything for us […] The effort to establish a veritable duality, even a trinity (Es, Ich, and Überich expressing itself through the censor) has resulted in a mere verbal terminology” (1968:144). Therefore, we see Sartre rejecting Freud’s metaphysical division of the unconscious into the *id*, *ego* and *superego* as conceptually hypothetical, arguing that psychoanalysis has little practical use.

If we follow Nietzsche’s proposition that a faith in metaphysics is a belief in nothingness, then the problematic division of the conscious and unconscious by Freud
and the primacy of consciousness in Descartes’ *cogito* — where neither has tangible or recognisable Being-in-the-world — *ipso facto* suggests that consciousness is nothingness. Although Sartre agrees with Nietzsche’s view of consciousness as lacking, he goes further still and — albeit mostly unacknowledged — adopts Heidegger’s proposition regarding the subject in *Being and Time*, and pre-empts many of Derrida’s tenants regarding the momentary nature of presence in relation to consciousness. That is, not only is the subject diminished by the loss of the primacy of the metaphysics of consciousness, we find it further divided in relation to time, as seen with the relationship between a ‘present’ and possible ‘future being’ in *Being and Nothingness*:

[A] nothingness has slipped into the heart of this relation; I am not the self which I will be. Firstly I am not that self because time separates me from it. Secondly, I am not that self because what I am is not the foundation of what I will be. Finally, I am not that self because no actual existent can determine strictly what I am going to be. Yet I am already what I will be (otherwise I would not be interested in this rather than that), I am the self which I will be, in the mode of not being it. It is through my horror that I am carried toward the future, and the horror nihilates itself in that it constitutesthe future as possible. Anguish is precisely my consciousness of being my own future, in the mode of not-being (119-20).

Thus, Sartre explains ‘nothingness’ as a process of self-negation or ‘nihilation’ where the momentary presence of consciousness is immediately overrun by an absent future presence, and is therefore unable to maintain either self-presence nor cling to the absent past presence. Thus, the condition of the possibility of change undermines self-presence by grounding the subject in a fleeting moment with no tangible recourse to either past or future presences. However, the potential horror of this negation of the present presence is nihilated with the imposition of the facticity of a possible future presence. Thus, the self-present subject is further diminished as consciousness accepts its ‘translucent’ nature on the one hand while recognising the unavoidable ‘facticity’ of its physicality on the other, in a necessary relationship between Being and consciousness described by Sartre as the ‘transphenomenality of Being.’

“‘This being emerges into the world along with consciousness, at once in its heart and outside it; it is absolute transcendence in
absolute immanence. It has no priority over consciousness, and consciousness has no
priority over it. They *form a dyad*. Of course this being could not exist without the for-

itself, but neither could the for-itself exist without it” (172). However, as we shall now
see this division between the nothingness of the for-itself of consciousness, and the
tactile facticity of the in-itself of Being, gives the subject the awareness of the increased
possibility of freedom.

Having established the lack of metaphysical certitude following the ‘death of
God,’ and that the for-itself of consciousness is nothingness, we are now faced with a
subject free from the dictates of aesthetic religious dogma, and without a
predetermining essence by which to make sense of its life. This led Sartre to postulate
that if consciousness is nothingness due to a lack of metaphysical presence, and
nothingness is freedom from metaphysics, then *ipso facto*, consciousness itself must be
freedom. However, there exist a variety of problems, for despite this apparent freedom
none of us appear to be living our lives to the extent of its possibilities — something he
puts down to the apparent anguish of the recognition of the limitless possibilities of
consciousness,¹⁷ and the meaninglessness of Being. Sartre explains the necessary
relationship between freedom and anguish explaining that:

> [I]f freedom is the being of consciousness, consciousness ought to exist as
consciousness of freedom. What form does this consciousness of freedom assume?
In freedom the human being is his own past (as also his own future) in the form of
nihilation. If our analysis has not led us astray, there ought to exist for the human
being, insofar as he is conscious of being, a certain mode of standing opposite, his
past and his future, as being both this past and this future and as not being […] it is in
anguish that man became the consciousness of his freedom, or if you prefer, anguish
is the mode of being of freedom as consciousness of being; it is in anguish that
freedom is, in its being, in question for itself (116).

That is, this awareness of the freedom of consciousness is expressed as anguish — itself
a manifestation of the lack of metaphysical certitude and possibility of ever being self-

present — as it recognises that the past is nothing, the present momentary, and the
future a mere possibility. Furthermore, as the future is a metaphysical nothingness, it is
up to the individual to make choices regarding its possible future presence, thus increasing the anguish of the subject, and is explained by Sartre thus:

[M]y future being is always nihilated and reduced to the rank of a simple possibility because the future which I am remains out of reach. But we ought to note that in these various instances we have to do with a temporal form where I await myself in the future, where I ‘make an appointment with myself on the other side of that hour, of that day, or of that month.’ Anguish is the fear of not finding myself at that appointment, of no longer even wishing to be there (124).

Thus, anguish is the recognition of a fundamental lack of self-presence and inability to achieve it, while this freedom of choice is placed firmly back onto consciousness and forces the subject to accept responsibility for the future of its own limitless yet nihilating Being, causing yet another division within an already diminished subject.

Indicating that consciousness as nothingness becomes aware of its freedom through anguish, Sartre then undermines both this position and criticisms of his work, with his discussion of ‘bad faith.’ While we have already seen the subject divided between the in-itself and the for-itself, with the concept of bad faith he divides the subject further still, for it is the anguish of freedom that causes consciousness to deny the extent of that freedom:

[T]he one who practices bad faith is hiding a displeasing truth or presenting as truth a pleasing untruth. Bad faith then has in appearance the structure of a falsehood. Only what changes everything is the fact that in bad faith it is from myself that I am hiding the truth. Thus the duality of the deceiver and the deceived does not exist here. Bad faith on the contrary implies the unity of a single consciousness (139).

In other words, not only does consciousness avoid the anguish of freedom, it then takes flight from its potential in a process of self-deception that further divides the subject. As René Lafarge argues, for the subject suffering from bad faith: “Freedom is just a nuisance, so we just declare that it does not exist” (1970:93), while going on to explain that: “It is the refusal of our condition, of freedom and the anguish which constitute us. The first act of bad faith is to flee what one cannot flee, to flee what one is” (110). That is, the act of bad faith comes about when the censor acting within consciousness instructs it to flee from freedom and nothingness, while at once undermining this
freedom through the interpellation of a past presence, or facticity, by the for-itself, in order to become an in-itself Being-in-the-world.

Sartre proposes that consciousness actively rejects freedom through bad faith arguing that: “A person frees himself from himself by the very act by which he makes himself an object for himself. To draw up a perpetual inventory of what one is means constantly to repudiate oneself and to take refuge in a sphere where one is no longer anything but a pure, free look. The goal of bad faith, as we said, is to put oneself out of reach; it is an escape” (1968:160). Thus, bad faith finds the subject denying the nothingness of consciousness, while attempting to become the in-itself that it is not. In his discussion of *Being and Time* in *Philosophy: The Classics*, Nigel Warburton, puts this process succinctly: “We maintain ourselves in bad faith by keeping our transcendence and facticity separate from each other, by thinking of ourselves either as wholly different from our bodies (denying an aspect of our facticity […]) or else as wholly different from our possibilities (pretending to be an in-itself)” (1998:199). In other words, bad faith leads us to deny the translucent nothingness of consciousness and to interpellate ourselves as an in-itself, and further denies the subject self-presence by embracing the metaphysical facticity of a past presence while attempting to maintain it as a future presence, thereby denying the possible freedom of alternative being. We see clearly in Sartre’s discussion of bad faith the aporia of subjectivity, wherein the division of the for-itself and in-itself is further compounded as self-deception irrevocably divides the subject in a negative manner, given that: “The being of human reality is suffering because it emerges in being as perpetually haunted by a totality which it is without being able to be it, precisely because it could not attain the in-itself without losing itself as a for-itself. Human reality therefore is by nature an unhappy consciousness with no possibility of transcending its unhappy state” (1968:172).
However, as we shall see, this division is not the only expression of the diminished subject in Sartre’s work.

Thus far, this discussion of Sartre’s existential investigation into Being has focused on the manner in which the subject is internally divided between the in-itself and for-itself, and the manner in which consciousness undermines the possibilities of freedom with bad faith. The supposed extent of this freedom has led to much criticism of Sartre, yet we shall now turn our attention to the relationship between Being and Other, whereby he further divides the subject by placing external limits on the extent of this freedom while answering many of his critics. Needless to say, this problematic relationship with the Other is one that amplifies the previously mentioned divide between the in-itself and for-itself leading to yet more bad faith. Sartre explains this proposition in *Being and Nothingness* when arguing that:

> [A]lthough this metastable concept of ‘transcendence-facticity’ is one of the most basic instruments of bad faith it is not the only one of its kind. We can equally well use another kind of duplicity derived from human reality which we will express roughly by saying that its being-for-itself implies correlative a being-for-others. Upon any one of my actions it is always possible for two looks to converge, mine and that of the Other. The action will not present exactly the same structure in each case. But as we shall see later, as everyone feels, there is between these two aspects of my being, no difference between appearance and being — as if I were to myself the truth of myself and as if the Other possessed only a deformed image of me. The equal dignity of being, possessed by my being-for-others and by my being-for-myself permits a perpetual disintegrating synthesis and a perpetual game of escape from the for-itself to the for-others and from the for-others to the for-itself (150).

With the arrival of the Other we see yet another limit placed on consciousness, and it is this external phenomena that diminishes the potential possibilities of the freedom of nothingness. For in the Other we come up against an-Other who is as free with possible transcendence as we are, yet can in no way be expected to recognise, or accept, the unlimited freedom of our own translucence, and thus we become an object-for-others and vice versa. The freedom of this Other consciousness limits the possibility of our transcendence and increases the chance of a ‘deformed’ image of my being becoming
irrevocably recognised as a facticity for the Other, and with this object state comes the limitation of my possible future freedom.

The recognition of the for-itself as an object for the Other manifests itself as fear and shame, as our consciousness realises that it is not in sole control of its Being-in-the-world, and that its freedom is diminished in a necessary relationship with the Other:

Fear implies that I appear to myself as threatened by virtue of my being a presence in the world, not in my capacity as for-itself which makes the world exist. It is the object which I am which is in danger in the world and which as such, because of its indissoluble unity of being with the being which I have to be. Fear is therefore the discovery of my being-as-object on the occasion of the appearance of another object in my perceptive field. It reflects the origin of all fear, which is the fearful discovery of my pure and simple object-state insofar as it is transcended by possibilities which are not my possibilities (204).

Therefore, this recognition of the Other has a limiting effect on Sartre’s conception of the freedom of consciousness, for not only is the for-itself forced to acknowledge its necessary relationship with the in-itself, it recognises that yet another unavoidable ‘dyad’ at once threatens and diminishes both its current and possible future presence. He goes on to explain that this manifests itself as a shame that: “is the recognition of the fact that I am indeed that object which the Other is looking at and judging. I can be ashamed only as my freedom escapes me in order to become a given object” (199), and that: “If there is an Other, whatever or whoever he may be, whatever may be his relations with me, and without acting upon me in any way except by the pure emergence of his being — then I have an outside, I have a nature. My original fall is the existence of the Other” (201). Thus, the realisation that the for-itself is an object-for-the-Other is expressed as shame, while the interaction between the in-itself and the Other threatens the freedom of consciousness by ‘bringing it back to earth,’ giving it facticity, albeit in a greatly diminished manner. As Sartre goes on to explain: “The Other is the first permanent flight of things towards a limit which I apprehend as an object at a certain distance from me but which escapes me inasmuch as it unfolds about itself its own distances. Moreover this process of disintegration gains momentum […]"
The appearance of the Other in the world corresponds therefore to a congealed sliding of the whole universe, to a decentralization of the world which undermines the centralization which I am simultaneously effecting” (192) In ‘other’ words, the existence of the Other necessarily undermines any attempt by consciousness to exist as purely present to itself, indicating that Sartre’s conception of the possible extent of the freedom of being is always already diminished.23

3.2.c. Sartre and Literature: The Roads to Freedom?

‘Humanity will continue on its futile journey, the usual people will ask themselves the usual questions, and wreck their lives in the usual way.’
Jacques eyed him with a knowing smile. ‘And what does it all come to?’
‘Well, just to nothing,’ said Mathieu.

Although there has been an increased focus on the literary in this teleology of the diminished subject, in Sartre’s work we see a concerted effort to carry out a ‘linguistic turn’ and redresses the divisions between literature and the specialised discourse of philosophy that stretch back to the ‘wrong turn.’ The importance of literature to Sartre is best exemplified when we consider the impact his first novel Nausea — published in France as The Diary of Antoine Roquentin — had on his most famous philosophical text Being and Nothingness. That Nausea can be read as a work of literature that successfully transcends the traditional boundaries between discourses is explained by Hazel Barnes who argues that: “until the publication of Being and Nothingness, Sartre’s concern with men’s happiness and unhappiness, their ethical problems, purposes, and conduct was expressed largely in his purely literary works. Of these the novel, Nausea […] is the richest in philosophical content. In fact one might truthfully say that the only full exposition of its meaning would be the total volume of Being and Nothingness” (1956:xix). In other words, not only was Nausea a philosophical work which fictionally investigated many of the theoretical propositions of the work of Nietzsche, Husserl and Heidegger, for Barnes, Being and Nothingness is a companion piece which extrapolates
these ideas in a more traditional academic framework, albeit with its own flourishes of metaphoric prose.\textsuperscript{24} Barnes goes on to explain that \textit{Nausea} can be read as: “the ‘taste of my facticity,’ the revelation of my body to me and of the fact of my inescapable connection with Being-in-itself” (xx). Thus Sartre explores the tactile facticity of the recognition of consciousness of itself as an object-in-the-world that manifests itself as a feeling of sickness. Although \textit{Being and Nothingness} elucidates the philosophical propositions he initiates in \textit{Nausea}, the latter remains a far more accessible investigation into his complex theoretical propositions.\textsuperscript{25}

That \textit{Nausea} can be read as a prototype for \textit{Being and Nothingness} becomes apparent when it makes reference to the refutation of the primacy of consciousness, as seen with his humorous reworking of Descartes \textit{cogito} as: “I do not think therefore I am a moustache” (1983:147). The problematic relationship of consciousness, time and bad faith: “For me the past was only a pensioning off: it was another way of existing, a state holiday and inactivity; each event, when it had played its part, dutifully packed itself away in a box and became an honorary event: we find it so difficult to imagine nothingness. Now I knew. Things are entirely what they appear to be and behind them […] there is nothing” (140). The metaphysical nothingness of consciousness and shame of being an object-in-the-world: “I haven’t any troubles, I have some money like a gentleman of leisure, no boss, no wife, no children; I exist, that’s all. And that particular trouble is so vague, so metaphysical, that I am ashamed of it” (153). The meaningless of existence: “‘I was just thinking,’ I tell him, laughing, ‘that here we are, all of us, eating and drinking to preserve our precious existence, and that there’s nothing, nothing, absolutely no reason for existing.’” (162). The interpellation of bad faith in the act of sincerity: “‘Perhaps you are a misanthrope?’ I know what this fallacious effort at conciliation hides. He is asking very little from me in fact: simply to accept a label. But this is a trap: if I consent, the Autodidact triumphs, I am promptly out-flanked,
recaptured, overtaken, for humanism takes all human attitudes and fuses them together” (170). Nietzsche’s anti-metaphysical view of the subject as Human, All Too Human, and Roquentin’s Pro-crustacean-like acquiescence to moral law mimicking ‘Aphorism 43’ of Twilight of the Idols: “I don’t need to turn around to know that they are watching me through the windows; they are looking at my back with surprise and disgust: they thought that I was like them, that I was a man, and I deceived them. All of a sudden, I lost the appearance of a man and they saw a crab escaping backwards from that all too human room” (178). The absurdity of existence and the arbitrary nature of language: “And without formulating anything clearly, I understood that I had found the key to Existence, the key to my Nausea, to my own life. In fact, all that I was able to grasp afterwards came down to this fundamental absurdity. Absurdity: another word; I am struggling against words” (185). And the notion of freedom in the face of bad faith: “I am free: I haven’t a single reason for living left, all the ones I have tried have given way and I can’t imagine any more. I am still quite young, I still have enough strength to start again. But what must I start again? Only now do I realise how much, in the midst of my great terror and nausea, I had counted on Anny to save me. My past is dead, Monsieur Rollebon is dead, […] I am alone in this white street lined with gardens. Alone and free. But this freedom is rather like death. Today my life comes to an end” (223).

Despite the nihilism of the denouement of Nausea Sartre introduces the notion of freedom and literature that he would explore further upon completing Being and Nothingness. After recognising the nauseating aporia of the nothingness of his Being and the trap of bad faith, Roquentin has an epiphany while recognising his love of jazz, and realises the time wasted writing a history of Monsieur Rollebon, postulating that:

Couldn’t I try … Naturally, it wouldn’t be a question a tune … But couldn’t I in another medium? … It would have to be a book: I don’t know how to do anything else. But not a history book: history talks about what has existed — an existent can never justify the existence of another existent. … Another kind of book. I don’t quite know which kind — but you would have to guess, behind the printed words, behind the pages, something which didn’t exist, which was above existence. The sort of
story, for example, which could never happen, an adventure. It would have to be beautiful and hard as steel and make people ashamed of their existence (252).

Thus, *Nausea* literally becomes the *Diary of Antoine Roquentin*, an explanation of the philosophical implications behind the writing of the book we have just read. As David Caute explains in the ‘Introduction’ to *What is Literature?* Roquentin is: “Experiencing acute anguish in the face of the gulf which divides him from the world — the gulf which Sartre defines as freedom — he attempts to escape into the In-Itself. He can scarcely maintain a relationship with any other human being. Taken at face value, this novel exudes pessimism. But Sartre already believed that the literary exploration of such a condition, if penetrating and truthful, has the therapeutic value of helping the reader to identify and transcend his alienation” (1986:xi). Therefore, *Nausea* can be seen as an attempt to fictionalise complex theoretical premises, while defamiliarising everyday experiences through the facticity of nausea — something Sartre believed could shock the reader from their complacent bad faith. However, in *Jean-Paul Sartre: A Literary and Political Study*, Philip Thody questions the extent of his success indicating that he: “does not […] succeed in persuading us that our life is a useless excrescence of which we should be ashamed. It is a matter of empirical fact that few people do experience their own existence as nauseating or are overwhelmed with horror at the thought of so many unnecessary beings. The main argument against Existential philosophy […] is that it often rests on a highly specialized personal experience” (1972:17). And it is the problematic nature of freedom and the validity of literature as philosophy that I shall now turn to.

Although *What is Literature?* was published for the first time in 1948, the essays collected therein were individually published in *Les Tempes modernes* — a journal established and edited by Sartre — and explain his manifesto for a ‘committed literature’ that would stir the reader from their bad faith and embrace the positive
possibilities of the fear of their potential freedom. This was something he alluded to much earlier in *Being and Nothingness* wherein he argued that:

Since the writer recognizes, by the very fact that he takes the trouble to write, the freedom of his readers, and since the reader, by the mere fact of his opening the book, recognizes the freedom of the writer, the work of art, from whichever side you approach it, it is an act of confidence in the freedom of men. And since readers, like the author, recognize this freedom only to demand it manifest itself, the work can be defined as an imaginary presentation of the world insofar as it determines human freedom. Thus there is no ‘gloomy literature,’ since, however dark may be the colors in which the writer paints the world, he paints it only so that free men may feel their freedom as they face it (1968:376).

That is, the metaphysical nature of language, employed by both the self and other, legitimates bad faith when the sincere naming of the subject alienates them from the possibilities of their potential freedom. He posits that the ‘imaginary presentation’ of the free subject in literature goes some way towards defamiliarising of the act of bad faith by making the reader aware of certain stifling cultural conventions that are interpellelated by everyday language as *a priori*. As Caute acknowledges, Sartre believed that: “literature, properly employed, can be a powerful means of liberating the reader from the kinds of alienation which develop in particular situations. By this process the writer also frees himself and overcomes his own alienation. Sartre argued that literature is alienated when it forgets or ignores its autonomy and places itself at the service of the temporal power, dogma and mystification. It is the writer’s mission to dispel inertia, ignorance, prejudice and false emotion” (1986:ix).

What is important to Sartre here is not simply the act of writing — for he himself shows a deterministic value judgment by showing disdain towards poetic writing — but instead calls for a committed writing that would instead be an irritant. He explains the idea of ‘committed’ writing as a form of democracy in the essay ‘Why Write?’ arguing that: “A day comes when the pen is forced to stop, and the writer must then take up arms. Thus, however you might come to it, whatever the opinions you might have professed, literature throws you into battle. Writing is a certain way of wanting
freedom; once you have begun, you are committed, willy-nilly” (1986:47). However, what Sartre is referring to here is not the democracy of a political dogma, or cultural value, but rather the fundamental philosophical freedom of the subject, something explained by Bernard-Henri Levy in Jean-Paul Sartre: The Philosopher of the Twentieth Century, wherein he categorically states that:

The concept of commitment is not a political concept underlining the writer’s social duties; it is a philosophical concept designating the metaphysical powers of language. To speak of commitment is not to ‘rope in’ writers; it is to remind them of what everyone knows or should know: that every act of naming ‘becomes an integral part of the objective spirit;’ that it thereby gives to the word and the things a ‘new dimension;’ that each word spoken contributes to unveiling the world, and that to unveil it is already to ‘change’ it (2003:62).

By virtue of its metaphysical nature, prose can be used as a weapon against the act of bad faith for this arbitrary tool can not only be used to legitimize the sincere naming of oneself as an object-in-the-world, it can defamiliarise this process. Levy expands on the question of freedom in Sartre’s text stating that: “Nor does What is Literature? say (what, I must repeat it, it never said, and what it was read as saying only at the cost of huge misrepresentation of its meaning) that literature should put itself, in particular, at the service of political causes and combats — that it should be expected to produce poems or novels militating for the Just, the True and the Good” (2003:62). As we shall see, the Sartre of What is Literature? was optimistically committed to the philosophical freedom of the subject through the literary, while his ‘political turn’ was to come later.

To see how successful Sartre was in creating a literature of freedom, one has to look no further than his Roads to Freedom trilogy. However, it is important to note that his impetus for this manifesto of writing stemmed not only from his perspective of freedom above all else, but also as the result of a vitriolic attack on François Mauriac’s La Fin de la Nuit, in the Novelle Revue Française in 1939. These criticisms were based on his view of the role of the writer in literature and attacked Mauriac for his authorial omniscience, which he argued denied the freedom of the reader to engage and identify
with fictional characters. Given this optimistic belief in the liberating powers of literature, following WWII Sartre began a prodigious output of both plays and novels espousing his views on subjectivity and of the role of fiction. The most widely acknowledge being his incomplete Roads to Freedom series which can be viewed as examples of his perspective of a ‘literature of extreme situations,’ a term he first used in ‘Footnote 10’ of ‘The Situation of the Writer in 1947’ in What is Literature? wherein he investigates the predominance of violence in contemporary literature: “What are Camus, Malraux, Koestler, etc. now producing if not a literature of extreme situations? Their characters are at the height of power or in prison cells, on the eve of death or of being tortured or of killing. Wars, coups d’états, revolutionary action, bombardments, massacres. There you have their everyday life. On every page, in every line, it is always the whole man who is in question” (1986:228). Thody suggests that Sartre’s ‘literature of extreme situations’ soon entered all aspects of his writing:

It is true that when Sartre was writing The Roads to Freedom he was convinced, perhaps rightly, that the apocalyptic world of the thirties and forties had come to stay. So much is obvious from his discussions of the popularity of the American novel of violence in What is Literature? He appears so certain, in 1947, that the ‘literature of extreme situations’ represented by Hemingway, Faulkner, Malraux and Saint-Exupéry is the only form of writing possible at the present day that he is unable to even consider the possibility of a novel which describes fairly peaceful everyday events (1972:67-68).

Sartre’s writing not only centered on the recent extreme situation of the war in Europe, but also continued to defamiliarise human relationships — something he began in Intimacy published in 1939. Thody indicates that: “Sartre has often been accused of writing semi-pornographic literature, and he has in general replied with the defence that he is merely describing things as they are” (1972:28-29). Themes such as abortion, heroin use, homosexuality, paedophilia, self harm, murder, suicide and violence are replete in the trilogy and in particular The Age of Reason, indicating that Sartre’s latest literary venture remained the understanding of extreme aspects of subjectivity and being — something that clearly resembles the content of a supposed ‘postmodern’ literature.
Despite Sartre’s initial optimism regarding the freedom of literature, his deterministic manifesto for committed writing would come back to haunt him, and led to criticisms of the ‘Trilogy’ and his eventual failure to complete the fourth and final installment. Philip Thody suggests that the failure of *The Roads to Freedom* to deliver its promise stems from Sartre’s inability to recognise the limitations of this supposedly free medium, and to follow his own manifesto, explaining that: “The real point is that the rules which Sartre try to lay down in his article on Mauriac are quite arbitrary and bear little relation to the practice of the majority of novelists […] What Sartre forgets is that there are no hard and fast rules for literature” (1972:65). That is, while *Nausea* succeeds as a philosophical novel, for Thody the ‘Trilogy’ fails to engage the reader successfully as either literature or philosophy arguing that it:

> [F]requently read like attempts to put his own rules about novel-writing into practice. In *The Age of Reason*, for example, he tells his story as far as possible from the point of view of each individual character and refrains from intervening personally in the narration. In *The Reprieve* personal motives are swamped by the rush of world events. In the third volume […] he gives up the attempt to present a complete overall picture, and returns to the detailed examination of private motives (1972:43-44).

Rather than successfully espousing his philosophical propositions in the ‘Trilogy,’ both style and content became transparent arbitrators of Sartre’s current philosophical and political ideas, undermining the main premise of his attack on Mauriac. This is especially true of *The Reprieve* which gained notoriety for being overtly aligned with the narrative style of Dos Passos’ *Manhattan Transfer* (1925). Thody expresses this negative attitude toward the ‘Trilogy’ when he argues that: “the characters in *The Age of Reason* are not particularly alive and not particularly free. They are manipulated by their author to demonstrate certain ideas, even though the author’s hand may not be as visible as it is in some of Mauriac’s novels. The title of the complete novel, however, indicates that the character’s in *The Age of Reason* are on their way to freedom” (1972:52). If the characters of *The Age of Reason* are on the ‘road to freedom,’ then by the time Sartre had completed the *Iron in the Soul*, and with his failure to complete the
fourth instalment — *La Dernière Chance* — it seemed that the journey was over, and Sartre’s committed literature had missed its ‘Last Chance.’ Thody goes on to state that although: “the narrative style in *Iron in the Soul* is still very highly charged with imagery, Sartre’s inventiveness as a novelist seems to have deserted him […] What he does seem to have lost, together with his inventiveness, is his original idea that the problems of liberty could be worked out in the framework provided by the novel” (1972:63). One possible conclusion to be drawn is that Sartre’s literature of freedom, as an expression of everyday being, began to resemble his political position — a valid perspective given that he was a card carrying member of the Communist Party — and that following WWII he had became so disillusioned with literature that by the time he wrote the blind alley that is the *Iron In The Soul* he became focused solely on politics.

The extent of the disillusionment Sartre felt toward literature would come to a dramatic head in *Words* — his faux-autobiography — that acts as an expression of the *aporia* he had reached both as writer and philosopher. Rather than being the literature of freedom that Sartre envisioned, the novel instead became the inevitable vehicle of the metaphysics of nothingness and the inaction of bad faith. As Levy explains:

> Literature is a lure, because it is a lie. And it is a lie because it makes us take the words for things and the images of reality, its simulacra, for reality itself […] Sartre had long thought that literature was a response to the illness, the treatment, the remedy […] He didn’t believe this any more. He even believed the direct opposite. He thought, in a nutshell, that it was ‘a long, bitter and sweet madness’ whose symptoms he had barely begun to catalogue and from which he urgently needed to recover. He wrote *Words* against words. *Words* is called *Words* because of Shakespeare’s ‘Words, words, words!’ — they are merely words […] we must free ourselves from the absurd fascination we have for these less than nothings (2003:454-56).

While in *Nausea* and the *Roads to Freedom* we saw Sartre carrying out a ‘literary turn,’ with *Words* we see him turn full-circle taking his own ‘wrong turn.’ This comparison is not lost on Levy also who indicates that the manner in which Sartre turned his back on literature: “is reminiscent of the way in which Plato excluded the poets from the city […] Hence, after *Words*, a whole series of texts, often interviews, in which we see the
old Sartre, ill and weary, articulating for anyone who still wants to hear his poor theory of a prose without style, without beauty, without effect and, basically, without any literature at all, whose effectiveness would come about not because of, but in spite of, words” (2003:461). This perspective of a jaded Sartre in the grip of aporia is expressed by Geoffrey Wall in his ‘Introduction’ to Modern Times: Selected Non-Fiction, wherein he paints a picture of a philosopher in need of political change and affirmative action, having been let down by literature, stating that after Words: “There would be no more novels, no sequel to The Roads to Freedom. After Auschwitz and Hiroshima, in a decade marked by neo-colonial warfare in Korea, Algeria and Vietnam, perhaps literature alone could not illuminate the dark corners of our modernity. Perhaps literature was part of the problem, a superior narcotic, dulling the senses and diverting the mind from the imperative of the age” (2000:xxxvi). Thus with the failure of Stalinist Communism following the end of WWII, and his own doubts over the freedom of literature, we can view Sartre’s ‘political turn’ as a choice for action rather than the continuation of bad faith, for as Levy points out: “The Sartre of Words […] now saw in the movement and slowness proper to writing, not so much the time truth takes to be true, but a waste of time, time lost and squandered, a time in which one was really fleeing from life and seeking death” (2003:474). Thus, in Words we see Sartre reviewing his literary pretensions as those of a writer and philosopher who had acted in bad faith, and he turned instead to a functional writing free of embellishments.33

3.2.e. Jean-Paul Sartre and The Diminished Subject

Finally then it is important to note that despite a belief in his own failings, the literary and philosophical works of Sartre can be seen to represent the premise of the diminished subject in a number of positive ways, for not only did he defamiliarise the nothingness of metaphysical philosophical discourses, his attempt at a ‘literary turn’ showed the work of literature as ineluctably constrained due the unavoidably
metaphysical and arbitrary nature of writing. It would be possible to expand this section to include such thought-provoking texts as Saint Genet, and the manner in which Sartre — seemingly suffering from existential envy — appeared to pin all his hopes of a life and literature of ‘extreme situations’ onto Jean Genet, nevertheless it was my aim to focus on Sartre’s work alone.\textsuperscript{34} Needless to say, much of what passes for critical opinion regarding Sartre has been inherited from the critical assassinations carried out by structuralist and post-structuralist thinkers in the 1960s and 1970s,\textsuperscript{35} and in his defence Christine Howells argues that: “his earliest writings problematizes any easy understanding of the subject, casting doubt on all attempts at identifying it other than self divided and self-negating […] this lack of self-identity is less a curse to be disguised than an escape route from a noxious fixity” (1992:334). That is, despite his best efforts Sartre failed to understand in toto, the human condition free from metaphysics, yet with this self-doubt — seen with his constant reworking and vitriolic criticism of his own work — he personally expressed better than anyone the philosophical expression the aporia of subjectivity he posited in Nausea and Being and Nothingness. However, Sartre’s mistake was to determine a way out of that aporia through the metaphysical ‘literature of freedom,’ rather than seeing it as a ‘possible’ Road to Freedom. As Howells explains, despite all of these shortcomings: “however fragile the Sartrean subject may appear, however far from the creative, self-determining humanist ideal, a subject of sorts still remains: be it alienated or non self-identical, its very fissures and cracks are what lets it escape the deterministic process” (339). And perhaps it is with this a priori inability to account for a self-present subject in a deterministic fashion that the true freedom of subjectivity may lay.
3.3.a. Albert Camus — The Absurd Rebel and the Aporia of Existence

To conclude this atemporal theoretical teleology of the diminished subject I shall now turn my attention to the life and works of Albert Camus who, despite being critically derided for a supposed lack of intellectual rigour, is included in this thesis due to his belief in the validity of literary investigations into human existence. However, the controversy regarding his theoretical propositions also indicates a tacit complicity by his critics with the age-old dichotomy that continues to divide literature and philosophy. It is my contention that while Camus continues to attack metaphysics and attempts to redress Plato’s ‘wrong turn,’ in his personal conflicts we see raised the spectre of an aporia replete throughout his art and life. For the purpose of this section then, I shall limit my discussion of Camus’ œuvre to his most famous novels, *The Outsider* and *The Plague*, and to his two key theoretical texts, *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*, focusing on the shift from an earlier nihilistic existentialism towards a hypothetical perspective of a meaningful existence through rebellion and community despite the absurdity of existence. Needless to say certain aspects of Camus’ personal life not only make for interesting reading, they are also pertinent to this thesis, and this is especially true of his relationship with Jean-Paul Sartre. Therefore, the latter part of this section will include a discussion of Sartre’s ‘political turn,’ something deliberately overlooked in the previous section given the impact it would have on Camus’ life and work and, in light of his untimely death, an unjustly negative perspective of both.

3.3.b. *The Outsider* — The Aporia of the Absurd

‘A few years ago I read a book by an American author, called *Is Life Worth Living?* Isn’t that the question you are asking yourself?’

No, obviously that isn’t the question I am asking myself. But I don’t want to explain anything.

‘He concluded,’ the Autodidact tells me in a consoling voice, ‘in favour of deliberate optimism. Life has a meaning if you choose to give it one. First of all you must act, you must throw yourself into some enterprise. If you think about it later on, the die is
already cast, you are already involved. I don’t know what you think about that, Monsieur?’

‘Nothing,’ I say …

The Autodidact smiles with a certain malice and much solemnity: ‘It isn’t my opinion either. I don’t think we need to look so far to find the meaning of our life.’

‘Ah?’

‘There is a goal, Monsieur, there is a goal … there are people.’


Although Albert Camus has been closely associated with French existentialism, this affiliation was limited to the existential nihilism personified in the character of Meursault in The Outsider. Published two years after Sartre’s Nausea, his first novel is a fictional exploration of a subject embodying the meaninglessness of existence free of the metaphysics of comfort, existing isolated in a world reluctant to embrace the defamiliarisation of the absurdities that apparently give meaning to our lives. The metaphysical self-present subject is greatly diminished in The Outsider as Meursault accepts that the only guarantee we have in life is the absurdity of existence, and the limitations placed on consciousness by a necessary relationship between our bodies and the Other. The extent of Meursault’s rejection of metaphysics and the manner in which his absurdist perspective diminishes the subject, is succinctly articulated by David Sprintzen in his text, Camus: A Critical Examination, wherein he explains that:

Meursault’s revolt is not only the metaphysical rejection of social hypocrisy, but also the personal purgation of the temptation to play by the rules […] Meursault’s revolt thus consummates a series of rejections:
* Of resignation in the face of death’s inevitability.
* Of acceptance of the meaninglessness of life without transcendence.
* Of any ‘leap of faith’ in an afterlife at the expense of the only life we are given with certainty.
* Of the rituals of habit through which one’s life is reduced to a meaningless routine — often rationalized in terms of a hoped-for-life hereafter.
* Of the oppression of normal social order in which we are expected to be, feel, and behave in accordance with the ‘rules of the game’ (1988:39-40).

While not wishing to condense the plot of this well-known novel, Meursault’s actions can be seen to exist outside of the metaphysical conventions of acceptable society, and see him conclude his last moment of ‘freedom’ with the cold-blooded murder of a nameless Arab. However, it the lack of emotion he shows over the recent death of his
Mother that convinces the jury to sentence him to death, and indicates the extent of the limitations placed on existential freedom which is soon replaced with anguish as the finitude of corporeal existence is brought into sharp relief with the temporal proximity of the guillotine brought to bear by the ‘Law’ of the Other. Camus explains that the recognition of death as a possible future presence is an example *par excellence* of the absurdity of being, arguing in his posthumously published *Selected Essays and Notebooks* that: “There is only one case which despair is pure: that of the man sentenced to death […] A man driven to despair by love might be asked if he wanted to be guillotined on the next day and would refuse. Because of the horror of punishment? Yes. But here, the horror springs from the complete certainty of what is going to happen […] Here the absurd is perfectly clear” (1979:216). Thus, despite his rejection of the metaphysical, his impending death leads Meursault to the ultimate expression of the absurdity of existence, as a set of discursive codes and conventions ‘literally’ bring about his death. Thus, Meursault’s failure to effect any change in a world caught up in the metaphysics of comfort, indicates the failure of the subject to attain the existential freedom alluded to by Sartre, and highlights the absurdity of isolated rebellion.

The difficulties faced by the individual embracing existential nihilism become clear with Meursault’s interaction with certain figures of authority following his arrest. Nietzsche’s view of the lingering shadow of God becomes apparent when Meursault explains to the Magistrate that he is an unbeliever: “This was unthinkable, he said; all men believed in God, even those who reject Him. Of this he was absolutely sure; if he ever came to doubt it, his life would lose all meaning. ‘Do you wish,’ he asked indignantly, ‘my life to have no meaning?’ Really I couldn’t see how my wishes came into it, and I told him as much” (1960:39). Meursault’s rejection of the metaphysics of an inherent moral human essence is expressed by the Prosecutor: “And I tried to follow what came next, as the prosecutor was now considering what he considered my ‘soul.’
He said he’d studied it closely — and had found it blank, ‘literally nothing, gentlemen of the jury.’ Really, he said, I had no soul, there was nothing human about me, not one of those moral qualities which normal men possess had any place in my mentality” (1960:57). And the Chaplain expresses the unlimited nihilism of the recognition of the meaninglessness of existence: “I could see the chaplain was old hand at it, as his gaze never faltered. And his voice was quite steady when he said: ‘Have you no hope at all? Do you really think that when you die you die outright, and nothing remains?’ I said: ‘Yes.’ He dropped his eyes and sat down again. He was truly sorry for me he said. It must make life unbearable for a man, to think as I did” (1960:65).

Therefore, *The Outsider* can be viewed as the ultimate negation of subjectivity as we see Meursault ‘literally’ diminished to death, and rather than being a tale of abject absurdity, it can instead be read as a cautionary tale regarding the limitations of existential nihilism. Furthermore, we see in Meursault’s final comments a calm resignation regarding the meaninglessness of existence and a recognition that death is the closest the subject can ever get to attaining pure self-presence: “Actually, I was surer of myself, sure about everything, far surer than he; sure of my present life and of the death that was coming […] I’d passed my life in a certain way, and I might have passed it in a different way, if I’d felt like it. I’d acted thus, and I hadn’t acted otherwise […] And what did all that mean? That, all the time, I’d been waiting for this present moment, for that dawn, tomorrow’s or another day’s, which was to justify me. Nothing, nothing had the least importance, and I knew quite well” (1960:67). This is the nearest Meursault comes to expressing regret, and leaves us with little doubt that Camus is suggesting that such an absurdist existence is far from a sensible way to live one’s life.

Germaine Brée supports this view in her book *Camus* arguing that:

Meursault, in his short life, via his physical person, spans life and death, violence done and suffered, understanding, love, delight, solitude, joy, and suffering. The body limits and defines man’s freedom, the feel of his options, and the nature of his relations with other human beings. Social conventions are secondary, and
subsequent. All options people make in life are of consequence because they concern finite human beings. Meursault is not responsible for the world given to him nor for the people he encounters. He is responsible for the manner in which he acts in it and upon them; neither is his initial ‘innocence’ not his awakening can change his act. Remorse would not change it either (1972:145).

This ironic acceptance of the inevitability of death as life’s only certitude, coupled with the isolated absurdist’s inevitable conflict with society and the Other — as seen with the death of the Arab — greatly influenced Camus’ subsequent work. Thus, with Meursault’s literal death, we see Camus turn away from the existentialist *aporia* of nihilism in order to postulate a meaningful existence for the subject alongside the Other, and not in spite of them, although as we shall see this was not without its own metaphysical problems.

3.3.c. *The Myth of Sisyphus* — The Rejection of Existential Nihilism

Having explored in *The Outsider* the ultimate negation of existential nihilism as the recognition of the meaninglessness of existence, in *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus ironically undertakes a certain resurrection of the individual by exploring suicide as a possible solution to the absurdity of being. It is Camus’ proposition that despite a realisation of the *aporia* of existence, the failure of the human race to commit suicide *en masse* has legitimate philosophical implications, explaining that: “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental questions of philosophy” (1975:11). He goes on in the 1955 ‘Preface’ to *The Myth* to explain that:

The fundamental subject of *The Myth of Sisyphus* is this: it is legitimate and necessary to wonder whether life has a meaning; therefore it is legitimate to meet the problem of suicide face to face. The answer, underlying and appearing through the paradoxes which cover it, is this: even if one does not believe in God, suicide is not legitimate. Written fifteen years ago, in 1940, amidst the French and European disaster, this book declares that even within the limits of nihilism it is possible to find the means to proceed beyond nihilism. In all the books I have written since, I have attempted to pursue this direction. Although *The Myth of Sisyphus* poses mortal problems, it sums itself up as for me as a lucid invitation to live and create, in the very midst of the desert (1975:7).
For Camus, that the recognition of the absurdity of being does not lead to suicide implies a sufficient reason for being which sustains the subject, and a necessary rejection of existential nihilism and an uneasy acceptance of the *aporia* of a world still replete with limiting metaphysical constraints. Camus advises that to survive we must reject nihilism and suicide as options and must co-exist with the absurd in: “a confrontation and an unceasing struggle, [and by] carrying the absurd logic to its conclusion, I must admit that that struggle implies a total absence of hope (which has nothing to do with despair), a continual rejection (which must not be confused with renunciation), and a conscious dissatisfaction (which must not be compared to immature unrest)” (1975:34-5). Thus, in *The Myth* we see a shift away from the purely nihilistic existential view of subjectivity toward an acceptance of the *aporia* of metaphysics, while Camus postulates how the irrevocably diminished subject can continue to exist despite this *impasse*.

While it is true that Camus explored the anti-metaphysical opportunities opened up with Nietzsche’s declaration of the ‘death of God,’ we see in both the style and content of *The Myth* a determinedly anti-determinist approach yet further removed from existentialism, which he began referring to as philosophical suicide.36 David Sprintzen outlines the distancing of *The Myth* from the existential nihilism of *The Outsider*:

If […] the origins of this essay in a sensibility in rebellion against Christian absolutism are beyond question, that existential negation, with which Camus is all too often uncritically associated, hardly provided the answer for him. Quite the contrary! He finds in existentialism the same unquenchable thirst for the Absolute and an impassioned inability to come to terms with nonbelief (1988:43).

Thus, in Meursault we find a fictional exploration of existential negation and resultant nihilism, while in *The Myth* we see Camus the essayist setting out on his own. That Camus intended to postulate rather than predict the possible outcomes of this *aporia* of the absurd as opposed to the deterministic existentialism of negation, is more than apparent, and finds him explaining early in *The Myth* — in ‘An Absurd Reasoning’ —
that: “The pages that follow deal with an absurd sensitivity that can be found widespread in the age — and not with an absurd philosophy which our time, properly speaking, has not known […] But it is useful to note at the same time that the absurd, hitherto taken as a conclusion, is considered in this essay as a starting point […] There will be found here merely the description, in the pure state, of an intellectual malady. No metaphysic, no belief is involved in it for a moment” (1975:10). As such, for Camus *The Myth* is a genealogical essay into the absurd, which attempts to express knowledge rather than metaphysical propositions. He explains further that: “It must be repeated that the reasoning developed in this essay leaves out altogether the most widespread spiritual attitude of our enlightened age: the one, based on the principle that all is reason, which aims to explain the world” (1975:43). However, while rejecting the history of metaphysical reasoning we find him clearly calling for a new optimistic approach suggesting that: “In fact, our aim is to shed light upon the step taken by the mind when, starting from a philosophy of the world’s lack of meaning, it ends up by finding a meaning and depth in it” (1975:44). Therefore, in *The Myth* we find Camus searching for a middle ground between metaphysics and nihilism, yet it was his increasing distance from existentialism that would have a marked impact.37

Having accepted the failure of suicide to provide a viable alternative to the meaninglessness of existence, Camus set about hypothesizing what life with the acceptance of the *aporia* of the absurd would resemble, and argued that once suicide was removed as a viable option, the recognition of the arbitrary and metaphysical limitations of existence would empower the subject, arguing in *The Myth* that: “It was previously a question of finding out whether or not life had to have a meaning to be lived. It now becomes clear on the contrary that it will be lived all the better if it has no meaning. Living an experience, a particular fate, is accepting it fully […] the theme of permanent revolution is thus carried into individual experience” (1975:53). Thus, for
Camus, this acceptance of the absurdity of existence leaves the subject at once metaphysically diminished and enhanced by the opportunities of freedom. He expands on this proposition arguing that with the rejection of suicide comes an increased awareness of the finitude of existence and the relative approximation of one’s death:

Losing oneself in that bottomless certainty, feeling henceforth sufficiently remote from one’s own life to increase it and take a broad view of it — this involves the principle of a liberation. Such new independence has a definite time-limit, like any freedom of action. It does not write a cheque on eternity. But it takes the place of the illusion of freedom, which all stopped with death. It is clear that death and the absurd are here the principles of the only reasonable freedom: that which a human heart can experience and live (1975:58).

Thus, with the recognition of the meaninglessness of existence we see Camus postulate a new ‘absurd man’ emboldened by the realisation of the finitude of mortality and free to explore and enjoy existence despite its limitations, leading him to argue that: “Thus I draw from the absurd three consequences which are my revolt, my freedom and my passion. But the mere activity of consciousness I transform into a rule of life what was an invitation to death — and I refuse suicide” (1975:62). Finally we see in the ‘absurd man’ — for we are still at this stage discussing a singular process — a greater appreciation of a life free of nihilism and suicidal thoughts, with Camus indicating that: “Happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth. They are inseparable. It would be a mistake to say that happiness necessarily springs from the absurd discovery. It happens as well as that the feeling of the absurd springs from happiness” (1975:110).

Thus, we see in The Myth a concerted effort by Camus to hypothesise a raison d’être for a subject who, although still greatly diminished by the absurd, can find a joy in living instead of wallowing in existential despair.

Despite the obvious differences between The Outsider and The Myth, there began a process of conflation whereby Camus’ literature began to be judged in light of his philosophical works. In Camus: A Critical Study, Patrick McCarthy argues that Sartre was especially guilty of this explaining that: “Camus was justly irritated when Sartre
used *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* to interpret *L’Etranger*. To write about the alien universe in a book of ideas was different from depicting it in a novel. As pieces of writing these works have separate as well as overlapping origins” (1982:143). Thus, began the problematic relationship between Camus, Sartre and philosophy, whereby his theoretical propositions were often ignored and — despite his clear intentions, and due in part to the close temporal proximity of these texts — *The Myth* was mistakenly read as a deterministic manifesto for the nihilistic existential subject of *The Outsider*.41 Furthermore, despite Sartre’s initial call for a ‘literary turn,’ this deterministic tendency to read Camus’ literature in light of his own philosophical and political positions was to have major ramifications.

3.3.d. *The Plague* — Commitment or Community

The language he used was that of a man who was sick and tired of the world he lived in — though he had much liking for his fellow-men — and had resolved for his part, to have no truck with injustice and compromises with the truth.


Having investigated the manner in which *The Outsider* an *The Myth of Sisyphus* explore the individual embracing the absurdity of existence in divergent fashions, I shall now turn my attention to the manner in which Camus explored how the ‘absurd man’ necessarily interacts with the Other. By the time that *The Plague* was published in 1947 — after a lengthy gestation period due to the German occupation of France — Sartre had already published both *Being and Nothingness* and the essays that would make up *What is Literature?* An inevitable friendship between the two was born out of their involvement in the Resistance, and resulted in Camus being closely associated with the existential movement. However, as seen with *The Myth*, Camus had begun to distance himself from the negativity of existentialism, an attitude that had been exacerbated by the recent atrocities of WWII. Furthermore, we see Camus having problems reconciling himself with Sartre’ tendency to demonise the Other in both his literature and
philosophy, something understandable given his experiences successfully rebelling alongside so many ‘Others’ as the editor of the clandestine newspaper *Combat*, and witnessing firsthand many sacrifices during his time with the Resistance.

That Camus should take steps to distance himself theoretically from Sartre’s nihilistic view of the Other is made clear by Hazel Barnes in her ‘Translator’s Introduction’ to *Being and Nothingness*, wherein she explains that: “In light of the numerous statements to the effect that man is a useless passion and that life is absurd, and in view of Sartre’s attempt to show that all of the familiar attitudes towards the Other — love, hate, masochism, sadism, and indifference — result in failure, it is no wonder that critics have been sceptical as to the possibility of future positive development” (1956:li). As such, *The Plague* investigates the possibility of the ‘absurd man’ existing in solidarity with Others in the face of the ultimate absurd situation of a random and indiscriminate death, and can be seen as a direct response to his experiences in WWII and his postulations in *The Myth*. If ‘hell is other people’ as Sartre believed, then in *The Plague* we see a community in hell, forced to work communally for their survival. Although *The Plague* has been read predominantly as an allegory of the French Resistance, it can also be read as an example of ‘Others’ being forced to work together in the face of a far greater absurdity. Camus’ text embraces and expands on the acceptance of the *aporia* of the absurd, and uses the metaphor of the plague to defamiliarise the metaphysics of everyday life through the drastic realisation of the imminence of death, in much the same way as he did with Meursault in *The Outsider*, and as seen during the Occupation of wartime France. Thus, we see him continuing the teleology of the diminished subject, as the possibility of an imminent death removes the metaphysics of existential freedom, and results in the subject being forced to live from moment to moment.\(^\text{42}\)
As narrator of *The Plague*, Doctor Rieux articulates the manner that the condition of the possibility of change has manifested itself as a disease that defamiliarises the metaphysics of self-presence, stating that: “This drastic, clean-cut deprivation and our complete ignorance of what the future had in store had taken us unawares; we were unable to react against the mute appeal of presences, still so near and already so far, which haunted us all day long” (1960:110). Furthermore, there is little doubt that Camus believed that an encounter with such an extreme example of the absurdity of existence would force the individual to take stock of their relationship with the Other, using the example of the separated lovers to explain this: “To come at last, and more specifically, to the case of parted lovers who present the greatest interest and of whom the narrator is, perhaps, better qualified to speak — their minds were the prey of different emotions, notably remorse. For their present situation enabled them to take stock of their feelings with a sort of feverish objectivity. And, in these conditions, it was rare for them not to detect their own shortcomings” (112). Thus, we see the subjects of *The Plague* variously diminished, for not only is there an acute awareness of the momentary nature of self-presence, the taken-for-granted aspects of everyday life — as seen with such metaphysical concepts such as love — cannot be guaranteed beyond the present moment. Rieux explains that the: “Here and Now had come to mean everything to them. For there is no denying that the plague had gradually killed off in all of us the faculty not of love only but even of friendship. Naturally enough, since love asks something of the future, and nothing was left for us but a series of present moments” (176). Thus, in *The Plague*, we see Camus literally diminishing the metaphysical subject out of existence, as the momentary and fragile nature of all human presence replaces the nihilism of the absurd individual.

Despite the extreme nature of their situation, at no time do the characters in *The Plague* stop fighting the disease, and it is here that the novel becomes more than just an
allegory of the war, and rather a metaphor for the continued fight against metaphysical determinism. That is, the *aporia* of the faceless nature of death represented by the plague becomes a metaphor for various forms of totalitarianism replete throughout Europe at the time. Despite the inhabitants of the town continuing to battle the plague it eventually abates of its own accord, and much like the Resistance following the Allied invasion of Normandy, the characters are not wholly responsible for their victory. Furthermore, as Rieux observes the celebrations that understandably erupt following the end of the plague, he recognises the need for continued vigilance should another type of pestilence arise — much as Nazism did following WWI.⁴³ Rieux expresses this caution in the final passages wherein we observe the observer thus:

>[A]s he listened to the cries of joy rising from the town, Rieux remembered that such joy is always imperilled. He knew what those jubilant crowds did not know but could have learned from books; that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightenment of men, it roused up its rats again and sent them forth to die in a happy city (250).

Therefore, we can read *The Plague* as a cautionary tale regarding our confidence in a possible future presence free of the oppression of totalitarian dogmas as fraught with danger,⁴⁴ while Doctor Rieux best exemplifies this vigilance and reflects Camus’ own questions regarding the violent activities then taking place in Stalinist Russia.⁴⁵ However, despite the overall pessimistic tone of the novel, *The Plague* does represent a marked shift from the absurd individual both *The Outsider* and *The Myth*, and this move towards a view of a community rebelling against the absurdity of existence does indeed mark a break from the existential nihilism of Sartre. That Camus still maintains an optimistic perspective toward humanity despite this absurdity is best expressed by Rieux when he proclaims: “to state quite simply what we can learn in a time of pestilence: that there are more things to admire in men than to despise” (25).
3.3.e. *The Rebel*: Camus’ Failed Rebellion

Having carried out a fictionalised account of a community fighting against extreme absurdity in *The Plague*, Camus used the theme of hopeful resistance as his springboard for *The Rebel*, returning to the lyrical essay form to explore the nature of rebellion stretching back to the French Revolution. This new focus was a logical progression that questioned at what point a community would revolt against the metaphysical absurdity of their lives, implying that any rebellion — despite the inherent meaninglessness of existence — must necessarily be in defence of something. Camus explains this perspective early on arguing that: “Rebellion cannot exist without feeling that somewhere, in some way, you are justified. It is in this way that the rebel slave says yes and no at the same time. He affirms that there are limits and also that he suspects — and wishes to preserve — the existence of certain things beyond those limits. He stubbornly insists that there are certain things in him which ‘are worth while …’ and which must be taken into consideration” (1975:19). That is, despite the realisation of the metaphysical limits that restrict the existential freedom implicit in Sartre’s work, Camus posits that under certain circumstances rebellion is necessary to prevent totalitarian oppression, such as seen during WWII. However, as he explains this:

Metaphysical rebellion is the means by which a man protests against his conditions and against the whole of creation. It is metaphysical because it disputes the ends of man and of creation. The slave protests against the conditions of his state of slavery; the metaphysical rebel protests against the human condition in general. The rebel slave affirms there is something in him which will not tolerate the manner in which his master treats him; the metaphysical rebel declares that he is frustrated by the universe (29).

As such, we see Camus continuing his attack on totalitarianism indicating that the fight against deterministic regimes such as neo-Nietzschean Nazism — and seen with his increasing distance from existential nihilism — are still responses to metaphysics.46

Stylistically *The Rebel* is an attempt at a non-deterministic history of rebellion, that hypothesises that the aim of any given revolt is to free a community from various
forms of totalitarianism that threaten the happiness he sees as necessary for meaningful existence. David Sprintzen supports this view suggesting that *The Rebel*:

> [I]s not offered as a comprehensive or universal theory of human nature, or of politics and social theory, nor does it attempt to present any precise program of action. Rather its aim is diagnostic, attending to what Camus feels to be a pathology of the Western mind prevalent for the last 150 years […] These concerns, metaphysical in nature, bear upon human destiny as cultural and historical forces have contoured the terms in which such issues find expression (1988:121).

Furthermore, it is Camus’ proposition that the recent history of revolt coinciding with the ‘death of God’ — as witnessed with the deterministic view of negation as the metaphysics of existential philosophy — has seen revolt transformed into political ideology, explaining that: “Human rebellion ends in metaphysical revolution. It progresses from appearance to facts, from dilettantism to revolutionary commitment. When the throne of God is overthrown, the rebel realizes that it is now his own responsibility to create the justice, order, and unity that he sought in vain within his own condition and, in this way, to justify the fall of God. Then begins the desperate effort to create, at the price of sin if necessary, the dominion of man” (1975:31). That is, one form of metaphysics replaces another just as the vacuum of religious belief is filled by politics. As Sprintzen goes on to explain, the: “reduction of philosophy to ideology in the service of a totalizing praxis is the contemporary response to a metaphysical imperative legated to us by the collapse of traditional religion […] The task of *The Rebel* is to diagnose this pathology of intellect that underlies and undermines revolutionary experience in order to contribute to the rebirth of creative rebellion” (1988:123). And it is this view of the recent totalising nature of political rebellion that Camus would investigate.

However, the extent that Camus was to attack this counter-revolution against metaphysical rebellion in *The Rebel*, and its reception in certain quarters, was to have huge ramifications. In a chapter entitled ‘State Terrorism and Irrational Terror,’ we find Camus discussing the Nazi Party in the same breath as pseudo-Marxist Stalinism:
The strange and terrifying growth of the modern State can be considered as the logical conclusion of inordinate technical and philosophical ambitions, foreign to the true spirit of rebellion, but which nevertheless gave birth to the revolutionary spirit of our time. The prophetic dream of Marx and the over-inspired predictions of Hegel or of Nietzsche ended by conjuring up, after the city of God had been razed to the ground, either a rational or an irrational State, but one which in both cases was founded on terror (1975:146).

This overtly critical response to the French Communist Party — which in 1951 held 25% of the vote — was, with the benefit of hindsight not only correct, but also incredibly naïve. Needless to say, following the failure of Sartre’s manifesto of ‘committed writing’ as a plausible tool for change, he had thrown himself with renewed vigour into left-wing politics, and it was with the publication of The Rebel that the evangelical-like card-carrying communist — and his team of left-wing intellectuals at Les Temps Modernes — turned their attention to Camus.

Much has been written regarding the widely publicised conflict between Camus, Sartre and Les Temps Modernes over their response to The Rebel. Yet Camus’ negative perspective of political totalitarianism was not without warrant, for although he had been a member of the Communist Party in Algeria before WWII, he broke with the party 10 years prior to Sartre joining. Germaine Brée explains this break indicating that: “He could not accept a view of the world in which individual human beings were considered expendable, whatever the end. In the thirties it was because he saw the Stalin-directed policy toward the Algerian Muslims, as a political game of checkers, that he broke with the Party” (1972:67). Linking political totalitarianism with violence was not difficult following WWII with millions dead across Europe and many still suffering in Communist Europe — causing a growing unease that eventually led Camus to side with Arthur Koestler against Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s increasingly desperate justifications of Stalin’s use of violence in the U.S.S.R. The Rebel, therefore, can be read as a cautionary tale regarding violence in any form of rebellion, but especially when used for political ends. McCarthy also argues this perspective indicating that The
Rebel was: “A philosophical essay, it was to expound the moral and political values that lay beyond nihilism. Its secondary purpose was to criticize the false concept of revolution that was then being expounded by the Communist and by Les Temps Modernes. Camus would show that violence could not be justified in the name of a future utopia” (1982:232). However, to Camus’ great misfortune by the time The Rebel was published, Sartre had made his ‘political turn’ in an attempt to escape the aporia that was ‘committed literature,’ and a fervent Communist ideal became his latest existential raison d’être.

Due to his close, but increasingly frosty relationship with Camus, Sartre asked for a volunteer at Les Temps Modernes to review The Rebel, and Francis Jeanson obliged. However, as McCarthy points out, with hindsight this turned out to be a mistake, as Jeanson merely espoused Sartre’s deterministic perspective, yet did so in a far from conciliatory manner, a move that understandably enraged Camus:

In general Jeanson’s view of Camus’ writing was like Sartre’s: Camus deified the absurd and refused to combat it: he had a religious not a political vision […] Jeanson followed the same line. He talks about Hegel but neither he nor Sartre really cared about the philosophical dispute. He criticizes Camus’ style because his flowing sentences are a mark of acquiescence rather than protest. His main criticism, however, is that by personifying revolt and revolution and turning them into deities of good and evil, Camus is detaching himself from the flux of existence. If he entered it in a dialectic of revolt and situation he would be able to change it. More simply, Jeanson is saying that L’Homme Révolté contains many dire warnings against rebellion but no vision of revolt. Its practical conclusion is ‘that nothing can be done and that the only wisdom is to observe the status quo’ (256).

Ironically, we see levelled at Camus the same charge of nihilism that he brought against existentialism and, more worryingly, the spectre of right-wing conservatism. This aporia led Camus to develop a hypothetical and anti-deterministic approach to The Rebel which was unfortunately overlooked by the those at Les Temps Modernes, and saw the argument degenerate into an attack on his philosophical ability, rather than a discussion of the text’s propositions. Thody highlights the extent of this vitriol explaining that: “the attacks on him from the left, and especially from Jean-Paul Sartre
and his allies, were vigorous to the point of being quite vicious. Camus was accused of selling out to the middle classes, of abandoning all the fervour and moral purity of his early work, and of depriving the French working class, by his attack on Marxism, of all hope of improving their position” (1989:12). While Camus was searching for metaphysical comfort and individual joy through revolt — in a world where existential nihilism and political totalitarianism had both proved untenable — Sartre responded by asking Camus: “what is the mystery that prevents people from discussing your books without robbing mankind of its reason to live?” (Quoted in McCarthy:1982:257). Understandably, the irony of this statement was possibly lost on Camus at the time!

It is important to note that despite his best efforts at a non-deterministic approach to writing born out his experiences in Algeria and in France during WWII, Camus was living in virulently political times. Furthermore, his rejection of Sartre’s political position continued with his attack of his left-wing manifesto of a politically ‘committed writing,’ and Brée makes this apparent indicating that Sartre: “had in fact been applying to French literature a Marxian type of analysis completely new in his writing. It emphasized rather schematically the relation between the mental perspective and ambiance of French writing and the class structure of French society” (1972:27). Having already distanced himself from existential nihilism and turning his back on political totalitarianism, Brée goes on to explain that: “Camus could hardly have been overly impressed by the tenor of Sartre’s manifesto […] He once ironically proposed an equivalent for the term ‘committed:’ ‘impressed,’ a literature ‘impressed’ or conscripted into compulsory service” (1972:35). However, in a counter irony, and despite Camus’ protestations, his novels and lyrical essays became the victims of a form of determinism that was the endpoint of various attempts to redress Plato’s ‘wrong turn.’

Sartre’s fundamental problem with Camus’ philosophical position was the opposite of his own, in that he saw Camus as a writer who dabbled in philosophy while
he viewed himself as a philosopher who ultimately failed as a writer. This issue is not
lost on Henri-Bernard Levy who, when discussing Camus, states that:

He was a writer. A journalist, a political thinker, a dramatist, but also a writer. And
what a writer! Isn’t *The Stranger*, in the opinion of Sartre himself, one of the
masterworks of ‘modern times’? Isn’t Meursault another Roquentin? And Roquentin
another Meursault? And who is to say in which of the two novels the winds of the
new spirit blew more strongly in those years? But there is [a problem] on the
philosophical side of things. Camus was an amateur. *The Rebel* was theoretically
superficial: its opponents had a field-day, alas, castigating its ‘second-hand
references,’ and its metaphysical substrate was far inferior to its impressive political
institutions. Doubtless Sartre too was no French Heidegger. But at least he worked at
it. At least he made an effort to pull himself up to the rigour and excellence of the
German masters and models. His rival, meanwhile, seems to have been content with
the master of the ‘essay’ (2003:46).

This point was lost on those at *Les Temps Modernes*, who politically and personally
vilified Camus for the popular success of *The Rebel*, despite what they saw — in an
extreme case of intellectual snobbery — as its lack of intellectual rigour. In an
exchange that lasted several months, the vitriolic debate highlighted this elitism, and
Sartre’s desperate belief that a faith in politics was the way out of his theoretical *aporia*.
Emphasising this proposition, Brée explains that: “Sartre made short shrift of Camus’s
[sic] point of view — discussing it in terms of his own postulations. But something
humanly precious was lost in the debate, which is just what Camus had wanted to
prove. In a small way, the incident verified his contention: a totalitarian view of the
world is antihuman” (1972:247). Thus, the hopeful voice of *The Rebel* is silenced as a
result of the intellectual and political bullying of left-wing totalitarian thought.

This apparent defeat would lead Camus to focus more and more on his ‘apolitical
art’ and further remove him from the political arena. However, it is important to note
that, in a final irony, this also led to an indifference toward what he viewed as outmoded
political factionalism which had little validity in a Cold War world at the brink of the
ultimate existential negation in the form of nuclear annihilation — something that was
to backfire terribly. This political apathy would see the work and the life of this French
Algerian conflated with the 1950s Algerian War, and in an extreme case of critical
revisionism, would lead some to view the death of the Arab in *The Outsider* as proof of Camus’ inherent racism.\(^{55}\) Thus, we see the dangers in conflating fictional characters with their authors, and the deterministic tendency to search for authorial intent in literature, something explained by Thody when indicating the irony of this situation:

By a coincidence which Camus could not have foreseen when he wrote the novel in the late 1930s, it also reflects the historical situation of a culture which, like that of France in the early 1940s, has been deprived of its past and refused a future. Like all literary texts *L’Étranger*, can never be read ‘*sub specie aeternitatis.*’ It was only when the Algerian war made critics and readers more aware of the racial tensions inseparable from colonialist societies that everyone thought of analysing *L’Étranger* as an unconscious expression of a set of racialist attitudes. Since nobody can predict the future, it is impossible to say what meanings the readers will find fifty years from now (1989:43).

Thus, despite Camus’ repeated attacks on metaphysics, nihilism and totalitarianism we see retrospective criticisms of his work along those very lines. Furthermore, we see the dangers in prescribing in metaphysical terms a role for literature, and of the difficulties in undoing the dichotomy of the ‘wrong turn.’ This becomes apparent when Sartre deterministically undermined Camus’ argument in *The Rebel* in light of his own flawed perspective of the philosophical and political role of left-wing ‘committed writing,’ something that Camus had foreseen would quickly be outmoded as world events moved beyond the metaphysics of Sartre’s temporally specific ‘political turn.’

Finally then, we see in Camus an example *par excellence* of the various issues explored in this teleology of the diminished subject, for despite the repeated attempts of the aforementioned theorists to escape the theoretical *impasse* of the philosophical tradition, and to posit a conclusive understanding of human existence beyond metaphysics, they all ended in *aporia*. However, Camus accepted the absurdity of meaninglessness of existence and wholeheartedly embraced this *aporia*, positing the inevitable need for the metaphysics of comfort at some level. This recognition of the inherent limitations of any given investigation into subjectivity, is stressed in *The Rebel* wherein he argues that:
We know at the end of this long inquiry into rebellion and nihilism that rebellion with no other limits but historical expediency signifies ultimate slavery. To escape this fate, the revolutionary mind, if one wants to remain alive, must therefore return again to the source of rebellion and draw its inspiration from the only system of thought which is faithful to its origins; thought that recognizes limits (1975:9).

That is, Camus’ dichotomy stems from the recognition that while an optimistic future for the subject necessitates the acceptance of certain metaphysical and arbitrary constraints, the need to rebel against oppression remains necessary in order to defend what he viewed as an innate human right to joyful existence.56

However, as is made clear with the critical responses to his metaphysical postulations in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*, the intelligentsia of his day — despite their own philosophical and political determinisms — were still railing against metaphysics and denied Camus’ absurd subject a meaningful existence, in both a literal and figurative sense, by refusing to accept the *a priori* nature of the metaphysics of comfort. Camus indicates this tendency clearly in *The Myth* when he states, with metaphysical certitude that, the only guarantees in life are that there are no guarantees:

> What I know, what is certain, what I cannot deny, what I cannot reject — this is what counts. I can negate everything of that part of me that lives on vague nostalgias, except this desire for unity, this longing to solve, this need for clarity and cohesion. I can refute everything in this world surrounding me that offends or enraptures me, except this chaos, this sovereign chance and this divine equivalence which springs from anarchy. I don’t know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I do not know that meaning and it is impossible for me to know it. What can a meaning outside of my condition mean to me? I can understand only in human terms. What I touch, what resists me — that is what I understand. And these two certainties — my appetite for the absolute and for unity and the impossibility of reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle — I also know that I cannot reconcile them. What other truth can I admit without lying, without bringing in a hope I lack, which means nothing within the limits of my condition? (51).

Thus, despite Camus’ acceptance of the limiting metaphysical nature of existence, he was unable to maintain his own rebellion in the face of totalitarian political and philosophical views, such as existential nihilism and Marxism, thus becoming a philosophical ‘outsider.’ In turn, we find the subject still crying out for the certitude of being and the need for the metaphysical comfort wrenched from their lives with the
‘death of God,’ and with the failure of philosophy, politics and religion to provide them with a suitable *panacea*. Therefore, it is possible to view the deterministic silencing of Camus’ investigation into the possibility of a future subject ‘happily’ existing with the recognition of the absurdity of existence, as giving rise to a ‘condition’ that has created ‘nostalgia’ for a loss of certitude in the face of nihilism. Thus, despite the hopes of *The Rebel*, there has arisen a predominant view of the contemporary subject as suffering from a ‘postmodern condition’ — yet another name for the *aporia* of the diminished subject — and being incapable of dealing with the absurdity of existence without a misplaced desire for metaphysical transcendence.

### 3.4.a. In Summation — Chapter 3

If one thing becomes clear from this investigation into the meaninglessness of existence it is the danger of determinism, and the unfortunate tendency for those fighting the oppression of certain metaphysical discourses to become victim to the more aggressive and totalitarian responses of those fearful of any manifestation of the condition of the possibility of change, or due to the eager appropriation of temporally specific, and problematic, political beliefs to fill this *a priori* void. Although Nietzsche argued repeatedly against the traditional determinism of metaphysical philosophy and religion — urging those ‘free subjects’ to recognise the terror of existence and embrace the possibilities of their freedom — his anti-metaphysical pursuits were problematised by the condition of the possibility of change. This led to the metaphorical postulations of his aphoristic writing style being taken literally by those eager to justify their own totalitarian political views, and to legitimate unimaginable acts of terror by proposing the political dogma of nationalism in order to provide the metaphysics of comfort in a time of extreme crisis. Although Sartre himself continued this anti-metaphysical teleology — following the terror of WWII and the failure ‘committed writing’ to stir the ‘inauthentic subject’ from ‘bad faith’ — he also unquestionably appropriated Marxist
discourses to assuage his need for tangible change. However, he fell into the trap of metaphysical determinism, and swept aside any counter-arguments to his need for certitude letting his lofty academic mind resort to the lowly character assassination of those opposing his intellectual might. And although Camus — who cautiously and optimistically posited a future for the subject aware of the meaninglessness of existence, and the need for the metaphysics of comfort to maintain the joy of living as opposed to existential nihilism — found himself on the receiving end of Sartre’s deterministic diatribes, the possible positive outcomes of his postulations remain unknown, not simply because of the diminished credibility that his work suffered as a result of Sartre’s attacks, but because his particular narrative was cut short by a fatal automobile accident — perhaps an extreme example of a physical manifestation of the condition of the possibility of change.

Notes:

1 For a full explanation of Nietzsche’s investigation into the Dionysian character see The Birth of Tragedy (1872), wherein he argues that tragedy acts as a genre of compromise between the absolute austerity of the Apollonian and the profligate excesses of the Dionysian. In Death, Desire and Loss, Jonathan Dollimore explains that Nietzsche’s interest in Dionysus instigated his attack on metaphysical subjectivity: “Earlier he had taken from Schopenhauer the idea that to be in touch with the most profound reality involves a dissolution of individuality, a death of the self. This is an idea that Nietzsche will retain, albeit in a modified form. Such dissolution is what happens in Dionysiac rapture: the principle of individuation is shattered in ‘mystical self-abrogation’ or ‘un-selving;’ it is shown to be a ‘mere figment.’ One ‘sinks back into’ the ‘primordial One.’ The process involves a ‘Lethean element in which everything that has been experienced by the individual is drowned,’ a ‘chasm of oblivion,’ a ‘shattering of the individual,’ a ‘delight felt at the annihilation of the individual’” (1998:236-237).

2 For Nietzsche, the acceptance of ascetic morality was a nihilistic abdication of responsibility and restrictive to the growth and development of the subject, explaining in The Antichrist that: “Life itself is to my mind the instinct for growth, for durability, for an accumulation of forces, for power: where the will to power is lacking there is decline. It is my contention that all the supreme values of mankind lack this will — that the values which are symptomatic of decline, nihilistic values, are lording it under the holiest names” (1954:572).

3 In the Genealogy Nietzsche explains the manner in which subjectivity is delivered from the nausea of the meaningless of existence through the self-presence of transcendence, yet indicates that this in fact diminishes the subject. Needless to say this perspective was to be extrapolated further by Jean-Paul Sartre in Nausea and Being and Nothingness.

4 Nietzsche explains this need for a revaluation of what he views as the arbitrary nature of the philosophical tradition in the ‘Preface’ to Human, All Too Human stating that: “With an evil laugh he overturns what he finds concealed, spared until then by some shame; he investigates how these things look if they are overturned. There is some arbitrariness and pleasure in the arbitrariness to it, if he then perhaps directs his favour to that which previously stood in disrepute — if he creeps curiously and enticingly around what is most forbidden. Behind his ranging activity … stands the question mark of an ever more dangerous curiosity. ‘Cannot all values be overturned? And is Good perhaps Evil? And God only an invention, a nicety of the devil? Is everything perhaps ultimately false?’” (1994:7).

5 In her ‘Introduction’ to Human, All Too Human, Marion Faber explains that rather than destroying conventions, it is with the ‘free spirit’ that Nietzsche begins postulating the possible outcome of his
one of the great scapegoats of all time. During World War I British intellectuals found it convenient to know better how to laugh at himself” (1954:6). And he abets the common misconception of the austere Nietzsche, when, in fact, no other philosopher makes a lig

inseparable. If the translator makes things easy for himself and omits a play on words, he unwittingly to say here that it is impossible to be faithful to the content while sacrificing form: meaning and mood are

intent exposing the stupidity an arbitrariness of custom” (1954:108). While in his ‘Introduction,’ them literally, then

...justification in metaphysical ideas. He must recognize how mankind’s greatest advancement came from

beyond superstitious and religious concepts and fears and, for example, no longer believes in the heavenly angels or original sin, and has stopped talking about the soul’s salvation. Once he is at this level of liberation, he must still make a last intense effort to overcome metaphysics. Then, however, a retrograde movement is necessary: he must understand both the historical and the psychological justification in metaphysical ideas. He must recognize how mankind’s greatest advancement came from them and how, if one did not take this retrograde step, one would rob himself of mankind’s finest accomplishments to date. With regard to philosophical metaphysics, I now see a number of people who have arrived at the negative goal (that all positive metaphysics is an error), but only a few who climb back down a few rungs. For one should look out over the last rung of the ladder, but not want to stand on it.

Those who are most enlightened can go only as far as to free themselves of metaphysics and look back on it with superiority, while here, as in the hippodrome, it is necessary to take a turn at the end of the track” (1994:27-8).

6 That idea that Nietzsche’s ‘free spirit’ was born out of the possibilities of freedom is explained by Faber who explains that in 1876: “the prodigious young professor of philosophy at Basel [...] was forced to leave the academy. His increasingly bad health [due to syphilis] made it necessary for him to request a leave from his academic duties [...] It was not only his health, however, but also his conviction that academic life was stifling and a hindrance to a true philosopher which prompted his departure” (1994:xxi).

7 Nietzsche explains the conceptual nature of the ‘free spirit’ in ‘Aphorism 225,’ the aptly titled The free spirit a relative concept,” explaining that: “A man is called a free spirit if he thinks otherwise than would be expected, based on his origin, environment, class, and position, or based on prevailing contemporary views. He is the exception: bound spirits are the rule; the latter reproach him that his free principles have their origin either in a need to be noticed, or else may even lead one to suspect him of free actions. That is, actions that are irreconcilable with bound morality. Sometimes it also said that certain free principles derive from perverseness and eccentricity; but it is only the voice of malice, which does not, itself, believe what it says, but only wants to hurt [...] Incidentally, it is not part of the nature of the free spirit that his views are more correct, but rather that he has released himself from tradition, be it successfully or unsuccessfully. Usually, however, he has truth, or at least the spirit of the search for truth, on his side: he demands reasons, while others demand faith” (1994:139-40).

8 He explains this in Beyond Good and Evil arguing: “That individual philosophical concepts are not something arbitrary, something growing up autonomously, but on the contrary grow up connected and related to one another; that, however suddenly and arbitrarily they appear to emerge in the history of thought, they nonetheless belong just as much to a system as do members of the fauna of a continent” (1977:64). He goes on in ‘Aphorism 20’ of Human, All Too Human, entitled ‘A few rungs down’ to explain that anyone attempting to overcome metaphysics would do well to maintain a respect and understanding of the history and achievement of philosophy, something apparently lost on certain ‘postmodern’ theorists: “One level of education, itself a very high one, has been reached when man gets beyond superstitious and religious concepts and fears and, for example, no longer believes in the heavenly angels or original sin, and has stopped talking about the soul’s salvation. Since he is at this level of liberation, he must still make a last intense effort to overcome metaphysics. Then, however, a retrograde movement is necessary: he must understand both the historical and the psychological justification in metaphysical ideas. He must recognize how mankind’s greatest advancement came from them and how, if one did not take this retrograde step, one would rob himself of mankind’s finest accomplishments to date. With regard to philosophical metaphysics, I now see a number of people who have arrived at the negative goal (that all positive metaphysics is an error), but only a few who climb back down a few rungs. For one should look out over the last rung of the ladder, but not want to stand on it.

Those who are most enlightened can go only as far as to free themselves of metaphysics and look back on it with superiority, while here, as in the hippodrome, it is necessary to take a turn at the end of the track” (1994:27-8).

9 In The Portable Nietzsche Walter Kaufmann expresses these inherent difficulties in his ‘Editor’s Preface’ to Zarathustra explaining that: “the book comes close to being untranslatable. What is one to do with Nietzsche’s constant play on words? [...] The problems encountered in translating Zarathustra are tremendous. Where Nietzsche does not deliberately bypass idioms in favour of coinages, he makes fun of them literally, then again by varying them slightly. Here too he is a dedicated enemy of all convention, intent exposing the stupidity an arbitrarinness of custom” (1954:108). While in his ‘Introduction,’ Kaufmann indicates the problems with dubious translations of Nietzsche’s œuvre stating that: “Suffice it to say here that it is impossible to be faithful to the content while sacrificing form: meaning and mood are inseparable. If the translator makes things easy for himself and omits a play on words, he unwittingly makes a lighthearted pun or rhyme look serious, if he does not reduce the whole passage to nonsense. And he abets the common misconception of the austere Nietzsche, when, in fact, no other philosopher knew better how to laugh at himself” (1954:6).

10 This refers to German philosopher Rudolph Steiner: founder of anthroposophy and the Steiner Schools.

11 The extent of the criticisms of Nietzsche based on misquotations and mistranslation, is explained by Kaufmann in his ‘Introduction’ to the Genealogy: “There are many reasons for Nietzsche’s [sic] being one of the great scapegoats of all time. During World War I British intellectuals found it convenient to contribute to the war effort by denouncing a German intellectual of stature whom one could discuss in
print without losing a lot of time reading him — and Nietzsche had said many nasty things about the British. Henceforth Nietzsche was a marked man, and World War II contributed its share to this type of disgraceful literature. But there are even more such studies in German — which is scarcely surprising. After all, Nietzsche said far more wicked things — incomparably more and worse — about the Germans than he ever did about the British […] Once it was established that this writer was a scapegoat, anybody was allowed to play and vent his own resentment on him, no matter what the source” (1989:9-10).

12 Read as ‘a monument more enduring than brass’ from Horace, Odes 3.30.1.

13 In her ‘Introduction’ to Beyond Good and Evil, Helen Zimmerman, writing in the late twentieth century, explains that Nietzsche’s book: ‘had sold only 114 copies a year after its original printing in 1886. It has since become, along with the rest of his work, one of the essential texts of the Western canon. And now, as the peaks of the human spirit flatten under the steamrollers of mass culture — shopping malls, movies, television, the advertising industry, the Internet — the extent of which Nietzsche could only have dimly imagined, his ‘critique of modernity’ resounds more powerfully than ever before’ (1997:viii).

14 In fact Sartre had addressed the problems associated with Husserl’s ‘transcendental ego’ in his first publication, The Transcendence of Ego, published in 1936.

15 In Philosophy: The Classics, Nigel Warburton explains that: “Being and Nothingness is one of the very few philosophical books written this century which genuinely grapple with fundamental questions about the human predicament. In its more lucid passages it can be both enlightening and exhilarating” (1998:193).

16 Hazel Barnes explains this relationship and division at length in her ‘Translator’s Introduction’ to Being and Nothingness: “This ‘transphenomenality of Being’ means that the object of consciousness is always outside and transcendent, that there is forever a resistance, a limit offered to consciousness, an external something which must be taken into consideration. Nevertheless we have not substituted a realistic position for the idealistic. For without consciousness, being does not exist either as a totality (in the sense of ‘the world,’ ‘the universe’) or with differentiated parts […] Without consciousness there would not be a world, mountains, rivers, tables, chairs, etc.; there would be only Being. In this sense there is no thing without consciousness, but there is not nothing. Consciousness causes there to be things because it is itself nothing. Only through consciousness is there differentiation, meaning, and plurality for Being” (1956:xxiv). Barnes goes on to explain this diminishing of the subject as an a priori internal division arguing that: “Nothing external to being caused the rupture in the self-identity of Being-in-itself. It occurred somehow in Being. Thus the For-itself would be a mere abstraction without Being, for it is nothing save the emptiness of this Being and hence is not an autonomous substance […] Moreover the For-itself is dependent on the In-itself not only in its origin but its continued existence” (1956:xxvi). That is, the for-itself and in-itself exist in spite of each other and prevent the subject ever being self-present, while being unable to exist without each other.

17 It is important to note that despite Sartre theoretical implying a greater freedom for the subject, and with many critical readings of his work pertaining to this supposed unlimited freedom of subjectivity, he was aware of certain unavoidable limitations. Laffarge reiterates this point stating that: “true freedom, which we say constitutes man, is the freedom of choice, and we are speaking of this freedom alone when we are speaking of consciousness. This freedom, like the freedom of ‘being able,’ seems to have limitations. It did not decide the existence of its being; it is not its own foundation. This privilege would be refused to god himself if he existed” (1970:72).

18 Laffarge explains the extent of the anguish associated with the realisation of the extent of its freedom: “And this is anguish indeed, this feeling which grips us when we realize that we are alone and helpless, separated from ourselves — from our past which has no other reality, no other efficacy than that we bestow upon it, but separated also from our future in which we lay our projects and of which we cannot foretell, alone in the face of a world of possibilities which are our possibilities and which nothing compels us to realize” (1970:87-88).

19 While not wishing to explain Sartre’s theories regarding consciousness in toto, the concept of the censor needs elucidating further given the manner that this metaphysical concept divides the subject, and finds Sartre returning to certain Freudian premises in order to justify the inability of the subject to fully embrace its supposed freedom. In Being and Nothingness he explains the manner in which the censor allows us to act in bad faith: “[I]f we abandon all the metaphors representing the repression as the impact of blind forces, we have to admit that the censor must choose and in order to choose must be aware of so doing. How could it happen otherwise that the censor allows licit sexual impulses to pass through, that it permits needs (hunger, thirst, sleep) to be expressed in clear consciousness? And how are we to explain that it can relax this surveillance, that it can be deceived by the disguises of the instinct? But is it not sufficient that it discerns the condemned drives; it must also apprehend them as to be repressed, which implies in it at the very least an awareness of this activity. In a word how could the censor discern the impulses needing to be repressed without being conscious of discerning them?” (1968:144).
20 While Sartre’s discussion of bad faith is complex, many criticisms arise from his pessimistic perspective of ‘sincerity’ and ‘good faith,’ whereby we believe we are supposedly acting in bad faith. In Being and Nothingness he uses the example of the coward to explain the problems with sincerity: “Bad faith is possible only because sincerity is conscious of missing its goal inevitably, due to its very nature. I can try to apprehend myself as ‘not being cowardly,’ when I am so, only on the condition that the ‘being cowardly’ is in itself ‘in question’ at the very moment when it is, on condition that it is itself a question, and at the very moment when I wish to apprehend it, it escapes me on all sides and is annihilated. The condition under which I can attempt an effort in bad faith is that in one sense, I am not this coward which I do not wish to be. But if I were not cowardly in the simple mode of not-being-what-one-is-not, I would be ‘in good faith’ by declaring that I am not cowardly. Thus this inapprehensible coward is evanescent; in order for me not to be a cowardly, I must in some way also be cowardly. That does not mean that I must ‘a little’ cowardly, in the sense that ‘a little’ signifies ‘to a certain degree cowardly — and not cowardly to a certain degree’” (1968:161).

21 Nigel Warburton explains that: “A major criticism of Sartre’s existentialism is that it presupposes a degree of freedom that human beings don’t in fact have. He sometimes writes as though we could choose anything; as if we could think beyond the limitations imposed upon us by our social situation and upbringing. We make the choices that we do because of what we are, and we are what we are because of what has happened to us. Sartre’s focus is almost entirely on the individual and the choices he or she makes, rather than on the social context in which groups of people live. For many people, social, political, and economic pressures are far more constraining than Sartre seems to acknowledge” (1998:202). Whereas Lafarge argues the opposite stating that: “Inseparable from Being, which simultaneously repel and fascinate him, at grips with himself in anguish and bad faith, man is condemned to make himself, but not in solitude […] I make myself it is true; but I make myself among the others, it would be sheer madness to say otherwise” (1970:112).

22 Lafarge explains the necessary relationship between the for-itself and the Other explaining that: “Pure shame is not a feeling of being this or that guilty object but in general of being an object; that is, of recognizing myself in this degraded, fixed, and dependent being which I am for the Other. Shame is the feeling of an original fall, not because of the fact that I may have committed this or that particular fault but simply that I have ‘fallen’ into the world in the midst of things and that I need the mediation of the Other in order to be what I am” (1970:119).

23 Sartre explains the relationship between the for-itself and Other in more depth than I can cover here, but suffice it to say that this relationship ends in conflict: “Everything which holds for me in my relations with the Other holds for him as well. While I attempt to free myself from the hold of the Other, the Other is trying to free himself from me; while I seek to enslave the Other, the Other seeks to enslave me. We are by no means dealing with unilateral relations with an object-in-itself, but with reciprocal and moving relations […] descriptions of concrete behaviour must therefore be envisaged with the perspective of conflict. Conflict is the original meaning of being-for-others” (1968:209). Interestingly, the ultimate extreme outcome of this conflict leads to sadomasochistic relationships whereby the sadist regains power by literally reducing the Other to an object.

24 For a prime example of the manner in which Nausea and Being and Nothingness parallel each other please refer to Barnes’ ‘Translator’s Introduction’ (p.xx), wherein she highlights this cross fertilisation with a quote from each text regarding the absurdity of existence which are literally identical.

25 The success of Nausea is still being recognised as seen with the recently published 1001 Books You Should Read Before You Die which states that: “Sartre’s Nausea is that rare thing in literary history — a ‘philosophical’ novel that succeeds in both its endeavours. The novel is at once a manifesto for existentialist philosophy and a convincing work of art. In fact, it succeeds to such an extent that it blurs the distinction between literature and philosophy altogether” (Thomas:2006:396).

26 On a personal note having read Nausea many years ago I found it quite a difficult book. Having re-read it with a background in phenomenology and existentialism I found it a far more engaging text, which does support Thody’s criticism.

27 David Caute explains that criticisms of Sartre were levelled at this deterministic value judgment towards practical, unembellished writing: “In this respect belles-lettres, both prose and poetry, is characterised by a ‘poetic’ quality which ordinary language does not possess. Sartre does not help his own case when he declares his dislike for poetic prose which uses words in order to obtain obscure, harmonic effects and vague, evocative meanings. This suggests that his distinction between prose and poetry is masking a value-judgment: his personal preference is for language which is descriptive and unembellished, a language tailored to express with urgency the most immediate issues of the time” (1986:viii).

28 This is also expressed by Caute when he states that: “The writer is urged to try and embrace the human condition in its totality and, in exploring a situation, to unite the specific with the absolute. Literature must help the reader to make himself a full and free man in and through history. Sartre deplores novels and plays which aim to reconcile man with his environment or which encourage him to escape from life.
Literature should not be a sedative but an irritant, a catalyst provoking men to change the world in which they live and in so doing change themselves” (1986:ix-x).

29 Thody expands on his attack on Mauriac in his book Jean-Paul Sartre: A Literary and Political Study, wherein he explains that Sartre: “criticized Mauriac for disobeying the first rule of the novel, which is that the novelist must never appear to know more about his own characters than they do themselves. The assumption of a God-like omniscience […] was, in Sartre’s view, quite alien to the spirit of the novel […]” Anticipating the argument he was to put forward in more detail in What is Literature? […] Sartre maintained that a character in a novel is brought to life only by the free decision of the reader to identify himself with him […] he can only lend his powers of anticipation and sympathy to someone he believes to be free” (1972:42-3). However, as we shall see this deterministic approach and the criticism of other writers and the make-up of a free literature would backfire badly against Sartre.

30 Thody expands on this point indicating the controversy surrounding such incidents as Marcelle’s impending abortion in The Age of Reason: “In 1946, for example, he justified the fact that the plot of the first volume of [The Roads to Freedom] centered round the projected abortion by referring to the statistics which might be used to show that in 1938 there were more abortions than tramway employees. He also maintained that the rather curious sexual relationship between the invalid Charles and the nurse Jacqueline [in The Reprieve] was something of which he had been told at first hand [An ironic comment given it involves masturbation]. He has not so far specifically mentioned the incidents in his short stories, but a remark which he made in 1951 was obviously intended to cover the whole of his work […] that: ‘If we speak of the body at its lowest functions, it is because we must not try to forget that the mind goes right down into the body … It is not for my own amusement that I talk about these things, but because in my opinion a writer should take hold of man in all aspects of his being’” (1972:29). Yet more irony!

31 For a full account refer to Sartre’s Iron in the Soul and to Philip Thody’s Jean-Paul Sartre in which he hypothesises that: “Either Sartre grew tired of the novel as a genre and decided to concentrate on plays and political essays as his chosen medium of expression, or he was unable, for political and philosophical reasons, to find a solution to the many problems he had raised in The Roads to Freedom. A clue to one of the possible reasons why Sartre has not yet finished the novel is to be found in the growing importance which the figure of Brunet comes to assume in the third novel […] It is Brunet’s dilemma, as the Communist betrayed by the party, which provides one of the reasons why The Roads to Freedom lead in fact only to loneliness and despair” (1972:59).

32 The extent of the ‘turn’ away from literature in Words is noted by Levy: “But the real implication, the book’s tacit message […] is set out much more frankly, is that writers should submit to the very same law which Sartre […] absolutely refused to acknowledge at the time of What is Literature? and which consisted in subjecting their work, enslaving it, the political imperative of the moment. Humanity is suffering, he now says. Children, all around us, are dying of hunger. And ‘faced with a child who starves to death,’ Nausea ‘is of little importance.’ Words [and] Nausea […] I have always felt that this was the watershed, the great line of fracture in the Sartrean mountain range” (2003:461).

33 Levy goes on to explain the extent at Sartre’s vitriol: “The Sartre of Words, the Sartre who pulled to pieces the grotesque figure of the writer who ‘finds it difficult to hold up his morose swollen head,’ was ripe for the hatred of thought: absolutely any tract, however hateful, written by any worker who spoke his own voice was better, in his eyes, than the mere words of an intellectual. This Sartre was going to be prejudiced in favour of young people […] This Sartre was not just ready for, but actively capable of subjecting himself to […] political and moralizing self-criticism […] explaining that his philosophy and his literature were worthless” (2003:474).

34 For a full account of Sartre’s investigation of the life and works of Jean Genet see Jean Genet: Saint and Martyr, his ‘Introduction’ to Our Lady of the Flowers, and Genet’s The Thief’s Journal. Needless to say, Genet’s life as a recidivist thief, homosexual, drug user and long time prison inmate fascinated Sartre in an existentially counter-discursive manner.

35 Howells explains the manner in which Sartre’s legacy has been overlooked and often tainted without acknowledging his influence on subsequent theorists: “Rather than recognize Sartre as a forerunner, his immediate successors preferred to return directly to the German thinkers and […] to radicalize still further their insights into the deconstruction of the subject. Sartre’s own discussions become an embarrassment, coming so close in many ways to the points the philosophers of the 1960s and 1970s wished to make, but without the brutal iconoclasm then in favour. The solution was paroxysmal. Only certain aspects of Sartre’s writing were recognized, his radicalism was almost willfully suppressed, and he was accused of that very bourgeois humanism and individualism he so profoundly and persistently attacked” (1992:326). She goes on to explain that: “Twenty years later, Derrida still seems unwilling to acknowledge that Sartre is not merely a forerunner but a real originator of much of what Deconstruction has to say on the subject. I have attempted to show here that Sartre, like Descartes, Kant, and perhaps Husserl, actually made a valiant attempt to grapple with the problems inherent in the theory of subjectivity — those of freedom/determinism, praxis/structure, self/other, and so on, rather than merely
acknowledging that such a work is necessary, or even inevitable. The present climate of thinking about the subject may now perhaps enable us to reread Sartre and not merely take him as read” (1992:349-50).

36 Camus explains his proposition stating that: “I am taking the liberty at this point of calling the existential attitude philosophical suicide. But this does not imply a judgment. It is a convenient way of indicating the movement by which a thought negates itself and tends to transcend itself in its very negation. For the existentialists negation is their God. To be precise, that god is maintained only through the negation of human reason” (1975:43).

37 David Sprintzen explains Camus’ desire to find a new theoretical position stating that: “He is seeking to diagnose a malady, albeit an intellectual one, from which he and many of his contemporaries suffer in order to point the way toward a cure. He is not claiming that those who do not suffer from that malady are wrong, any more than he suggests that his cure is proof of the illegitimacy of other remedies. He is simply seeking to determine the logic of those alternative prescriptions” (1988:46). Sprintzen then goes on to explain how Camus’ work came to be seen as a philosophy of the absurd despite his rejection of that aim: “Camus constantly refined his essay […] in the direction of greater objectivity and universality of expression. Thus many readers were led to read more into his argument than he intended. And yet, repeatedly, throughout his essay, he sort to underscore its limits. Not a philosophy of the absurd, nor an effort to prove that suicide is unjustifiable, nor even a critique of religion and the ‘leap of faith.’ The Myth expresses Camus’s [sic] determination to work out a rule of life consonant with the absurd” (1988:47).

38 The view that Camus was exploring such opportunities is exemplified by Brée: “The epigraph he chose for The Myth of Sisyphus aptly describes his own dynamism: ‘O my soul, do not aspire to immortal life, but exhaust the field of the possible.’ The ‘field of the possible’ was the realm within which he intended to limit and contain his own thought and action […] Camus, in The Myth, had set out to counter what seemed to him the mood of the times, the least conducive to action, a Neo-Nietzschean nihilism” (1972:133).

39 Camus explains his notion of the ‘absurd man’ in The Myth wherein he asks: “What, in fact, is the absurd man? He who, without negating it, does nothing for the eternal. Not that nostalgia is foreign to him. But he prefers his courage and his reasoning. The first teaches him to live without appeal and to get along with what he has; the second informs him of his limits. Assured of his temporally limited freedom, of his revolt devoid of a future and of his mortal consciousness, he lives out his adventure within the span of his lifetime. That is his field, that is his action, which he shields from any judgment but his own. A greater life cannot mean for him another life. That would be unfair” (1975:64).

40 Camus then evokes The Myth of Sisyphus as a lyrical exploration of the search for happiness whereby Sisyphus rebelled against the Gods preferring a pointless life pushing a rock up and down a hill rather than death. Patrick McCarthy indicates that this view caused much consternation among his contemporaries including the esteemed Samuel Beckett who in Molloy: “writes sarcastically that ‘certain commentators’ depict a happy Sisyphus. This seems silly to Beckett whose narrators are incapable of happiness because they are corroded by the meaningless of things” (1982:151).

41 Brée indicates that such aspirations were counter to Camus’ optimistic investigation into new possibilities opposed to existential nihilism, explaining that: “The Myth of Sisyphus explored the ‘walls’ that limit human enterprise: death; the bounds put upon men’s understanding of their own existence; the discrepancy of their own vital drives. These in his eyes are not ‘traps’ but facts. His purpose was to define an area where human preferences are of no avail. Where men have no choice, their freedom is not in question, not their responsibility. Camus here accepts the common attitude towards responsibility. This preserves him from the assertion of total responsibility and guilt that accompanies Sartre’s assertion of man’s unconditional freedom […] He is concerned with the use a man can make of his life within the range of possibilities open to him” (1972:136).

42 The momentary and fragile nature of presence is a repeated theme, and indicates an unrecognised lineage from Heidegger through to Derrida: “Thus week by week the prisoners of the plague put up what fight they could. Some, like Rambert, even contrived to fancy that they were still behaving as free men and had the power of choice. But actually it would have been truer to say that by this time, mid-August, the plague had swallowed up everything and everyone. No longer were there individual destinies; only a collective destiny, made of plague and the emotions shared by all” (1960:167).

43 At the end of The Plague Rieux is ‘rueful’ at the innate tendency of forgetfulness, and expresses this by evoking the spectre of Nazi gas chambers over the joyful scene of celebration: “Calmly they denied, in the teeth of the evidence, that we had ever known a crazy world in which men were killed off like flies, or that precise savagery, that calculated frenzy of the plague, which instilled an odious freedom as to all that was not the Here and Now; or those charnel-house stenches which stupefied those they did not kill. In short, they denied that we had ever been that hag-ridden populace a part of which was daily fed into a furnace and went up in oily fumes, while the rest, in shackled impotence, waited their turn” (1960:243).

44 Brée also expresses the success of The Plague: “Camus’s choice of the plague as the organic metaphor for his novel has been adversely criticized. Yet it was the symbol he needed. In The Plague, violence is a deadly faceless presence that works through the social organism, consuming individuals like a monstrous
machine, purposelessly piling up their bodies like so much industrial ‘waste,’ and silently, restlessly, invading all the spheres of private life, destroying identities, feelings, hopes, joys [...] Camus had something in mind beyond the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ dichotomy of the two sides, a new form of tyranny, the totalitarian aspect of modern war itself; the new methods of impersonal organization; the threat to the individual of the police state, or less dramatically, of ‘the system’” (1972:219).

45 As Tarrou explains to Rieux: “I know positively [...] that each of us has the plague within him; no one, no one on earth, is free from it. And I know, too, that we must keep endless watch on ourselves lest in a careless moment we breathe in someone’s face and fasten the infection on him. What’s natural is the microbe. All the rest — health, integrity, purity (if you like) — is a product of the human will, of a vigilance that must never falter. The good man, the man who infects hardly anyone, is the man who has the fewest lapses of attention. And it needs tremendous will-power, a never-ending tension of the mind, to avoid such lapses. Yes, Rieux, it’s a weary business, being plague stricken. But it’s still more wearying to refuse to be it. That’s why everybody in the world looks tired; everyone is more or less sick of the plague. But that is also why some of us, those who want to get the plague out of their systems, feel such desperate weariness, a weariness from which nothing remains to set us free, except death” (1960:218).

46 The popularity of The Rebel is best expressed by the effusive Sir Herbert Read in his ‘Forward’ to that text: “With the publication of this book a cloud that has oppressed the European mind for more than a century begins to lift. After an age of anxiety, despair, and nihilism, it seems possible once more to hope — to have confidence again in man and in the future. M. Camus has not delivered us by rhetoric, or by any of the arts of persuasion, but by the clarity of his intelligence. His book is a work of logic. Just as an earlier work of his [...] began with a meditation on living or not living — on the implications of the act of suicide; so this work begins with a meditation on enduring or not enduring — on the implications of the act of rebellion” (1975:7). While the import of this text on Camus is made clear as he evokes the memory of the disaster of the Spanish Civil War: “Having previously been willing to compromise, the slave suddenly adopts and attitude of All or Nothing. Knowledge is born and consciousness awakened [...] The rebel himself wants to be ‘All’ — to identify himself completely with this blessing of which he has suddenly become aware and of which he wishes to be recognized and proclaimed as the incarnation — or ‘Nothing’ which means to be completely destroyed by the power that governs him. As a last resort he is willing to accept the final defeat, which is death, rather than be deprived of the last sacrament which he would call for, for example, freedom. Better to die on one’s feet than to live on one’s knees” (1975:20-1).

47 Brée explains that: “The Rebel was Camus’s [sic passim] reappraisal of a mythology of revolt and revolution woven into the very texture of Western culture. Its meaning lies in a conclusion upon which much scorn has been poured. Camus had separated the question of social action from the rhetoric of revolt and revolution in which it had been entangled since the French Revolution [...] The Rebel restates Camus’s dedication to that community of men, in which contention and conflict are qualified and limited by the consent and acceptance of the imperfections, inadequacies, inconsistencies, and never-ending struggles inherent in the human lot, and of men’s simple addiction to their happiness” (1972:222-23).

48 The violence in France did not end with the Allied victory and led to a great slaughter which Camus could not reconcile himself with: “The year of great euphoria at the time of the liberation of France. But 1944 was also the year that had produced the outburst of hatred which had exploded in a vast lawless purge, only too slowly brought under control by the courts, supported by de Gaulle’s provisional government. By conservative estimates, in 1944 alone, approximately 40,000 Frenchmen were killed and some 400,000 sent to jail by their compatriots” (Brée:1970:204).

49 Although this attitude toward Communist Russia finally soured with the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, Brée explains how leftist luminaries such as Merleau-Ponty, continued defending Communism: “The outbreak of the Korean war, coming on top of disturbing revelations concerning Stalin’s rule by terror, had led Merleau-Ponty scrupulously to reassess his position with regards to Russia and the Marxist theory of dialectical history. In a first phase, when the outcry against the Siberian camps first arose in a France still shaken by the horrors of the Nazi camps, the French left was deeply divided. Capitalist propaganda, argued the orthodox communists; while others, like Camus, read into the facts the proof that Stalin’s rule had become a dictatorship, as ferocious as any, and which as such must be exposed. Merleau-Ponty had argued at the time and convinced Sartre by his arguments, that within the context of the Cold War, an ethical option could be made between the two super powers” (1972:102).

50 The failure of many to see past Camus’ attack of Communism is made apparent by Brée: “What went unnoticed or was jeered at was the anticipatory thrust of the book. Camus had questioned the adequacy, in the modern situation, of the Marxist-Leninist view of the historical process on which left-wing intellectuals so obdurately based their interpretations of France’s future. He also saw it as a recoil from reality, a blindness to the present, its dangers and potentialities. A new situation was emerging which did not fit the catastrophist pattern of social change through the proletariat revolution. Thence, at the end of The Rebel, the call to a new outlook upon the world to come. He did not try to predict what kind of world [...] But this was not the case with Sartre and Les Temps modernes in the fifties. Sartre was convinced at the time that, in its doctrinaire Leninist formulation, Marxism, both as a total world view and as a
revolutionary doctrine unifying theory and practice, was the only rational guide to the future, and to responsible action” (1972:7).

51 Brée explains that: “The confrontation of Camus with Les Tempes modernes was merely an epiphenomenon. It reveals the familiar human flaws in many intellectuals: the taunting tone and smug assumption of intellectual superiority on the part of Jeanson; his deliberate *reductio ad absurdum* of Camus’s [sic] argument; the mocking parody of imagery and style. The need to refute was obviously overriding” (1972:247).

52 Sartre’s undeniable impact on French intellectual thinking is explained by Brée who indicates that: “He could attack, persuade, conquer ‘the others,’ dominate and instruct them, at will. It was essentially suited to Sartre’s vision of commitment of a crisis — as a moment when a man is wrenched free of self-delusion and accepts his ‘role,’ from which their is no escape; accept, the play, the role Sartre has meted out to him” (1972:251-2).

53 Camus explains his own manifesto for writing in ‘Rebellion and Art’ from *The Rebel* when he states that: “Art is an activity which exalts and denies simultaneously. ‘No artist tolerates reality,’ says Nietzsche. This is true, but no artist can ignore reality. Artistic creation is a demand for unity and a rejection of the world. But it rejects the world on account of what it lacks and in the name of what it sometimes is. Rebellion can be observed here in its pure state and its original complexities. Thus, art should give us a final perspective on the content of rebellion” (1975:219).

54 Brée supports this perspective of Camus as a prescient, though reluctant, political observer stating that: “Although controversies that fused around *The Rebel* reveal much concerning the politico-literary tangles of the time, they missed the fact that Camus had intuitively glimpsed the French political situation returning to relative normalcy. The short-term tension and dramas of the occupation and immediate post-occupation years, and the rhetoric they had engendered, had become obsolete and, sustained, would lead writers to sterile political isolations and literature into irrelevancy. Therefore, the concluding chapter of *The Rebel,* with its quasi-lyrical invocation to creativity […] was Camus’s release from political bondage” (1972:6).

55 McCarthy indicates the problems that Camus’ political indifference would cause when he was in Sweden to receive his Nobel Prize for Literature: “During a Stockholm press conference an Arab student spoke up. He denounced Camus as an agent of French repression no different from the paratroopers. When Camus tried to reply the youth shouted him down. Camus was furious but he kept his self-control. He insisted on replying and concluded with sentences that were flashed around the world: ‘I have always condemned the use of terror. I must also condemn a terror which is practiced blindly on the Algiers streets and which may any day strike down my mother or my family. I believe in justice but I will defend my mother before justice.’ In context the sentence about justice and mother means: ‘I condemn all terrorism, even yours, whose cause contains much justice.’ At most it repeats what Camus had told the Arab students who visited him at *L’Express:* ‘I cannot support the destruction of French Algeria because I am a French Algerian’” (1982:294).

56 Although this too had its limits as Camus set up a problematic system of justifying the use of violence, or rebellion, that was distinguished from political violence, which he viewed as murder.
Chapter 4
The Diminished Subject, Contemporary Theory and Literature —
The Postmodern Condition and Generation X

4.1.a. PO-FACE 2007 — Against a Concept of Postmodernism?

‘Postmodernist’? Nothing about this term is unproblematic, nothing about it is entirely satisfactory. It is not even clear who deserves the credit — or the blame for coining it in the first place […] There are plenty of candidates. But whoever is responsible, he or she has a lot to answer for.
— Brian McHale, in Postmodernist Fiction (1999:3).

I am not sure what postmodernism is, although I do know a good deal about the arguments surrounding that term. None of the world-scale or even national modelings of the postmodern leave me entirely comfortable. An industry of definition and subdefinition has grown up around the question of the postmodern, so that there is already a need for a history of usages.

To begin this section I must emphasise that despite the abundant confusion regarding this nomenclature I have no desire to answer the question ‘what is postmodernism?’ However, it is one of life’s great ironies that while arguments rage, the term postmodernism has rapidly entered the vernacular becoming widely used throughout contemporary culture. Of course it is possible to tolerate this curious state of affairs if you adopt an anti-metaphysical position that questions all deterministic concept usage, or if you are comfortable with the a priori lack of the metaphysics of presence laid down by existentialism, post-structuralism and deconstruction. Yet, this lack of theoretical certitude has proven problematic to many giving rise to a plethora of positions arguing both for and against the term, thereby interpellating¹ and legitimating it. While not proposing a definition of postmodernism myself — for to do so would be determinedly metaphysical — there remain many who attempt to do just that. As John Rundell argues in his ‘Introduction: The Symptom of Postmodernism’ from the aptly titled Between Totalitarianism and Postmodernism: “There appears in the postmodern literature to be no agreement (a postmodern irony of postmodernity) about what
postmodern means. But […] two aspects have emerged — on the one hand, postmodernity is indicative of a new social form, and on the other, postmodernity is a new cultural sensibility, a new sensibility of self-recognition. There is a third, the postmodern critique of modernity” (1992:140). The irony within the irony here of course, is that while arguing that there is ‘no agreement’ regarding the term postmodernism, Rundell — in true ‘deterministic’ fashion — proposes that there are two, no wait, three contrary elements that can be attributed to it.²

One convenient locus that extrapolates this postmodern confusion is Ihab Hassan’s well-known ‘POSTFACE 1982: Towards a Concept of Postmodernism,’ wherein, despite warning of the vague outline he was about to mark in the shifting sands of philosophical theory, he provides an extensive list — and a handy schematic — of those theorists and attributes which may, or may not be postmodern:

Some names, piled here pell-mell, may serve to adumbrate postmodernism, or at least suggests its range of assumptions: Derrida [Then a list of 58 writers, historians, psychoanalysts, philosophers, dancers, literary critics, the entire Yale School etc. up to] Robert Wilson. Indubitably, these names are far too heterogeneous to form a movement, paradigm, or school. Still, they may evoke a number or related cultural tendencies, a constellation of values, a repertoire of procedures and attitudes. These we call postmodern (1995:260).

Although Hassan indicates that this is merely a sketch of a possible postmodernism, the arbitrary nature of his ‘constellation’ makes his now (in)famous ‘POSTFACE’ an example par excellence of the thriving industry in the metaphysics of determining postmodernism. This problem is expressed by Linda Hutcheon in The Politics of Postmodernism, wherein she determines that the true definition of postmodernism is that it defies being determined, while adding to the argument herself when proposing that: “Few words are more used and abused in discussions of contemporary culture than the word ‘postmodernism.’ As a result, any attempt to define the word will necessarily and simultaneously have both positive and negative dimensions. It will aim to say what postmodernism is but at the same time it will have to say what it is not. Perhaps this is
an appropriate condition, for postmodernism is a phenomenon whose mode is resolutely contradictory [...] In general terms it takes the form of self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement” (1990:1). That is, for Hutcheon, among others, a definition of ‘postmodernism’ is always self-defeating, yet this does not prevent her using this dubious nomenclature as the impetus for writing a book! However, despite having just added to the postmodern debate myself by highlighting the inherent problem of articulating this metaphysical concept, I will now turn to the work of Jean-François Lyotard and Fredric Jameson, and discuss the ‘positive and negative dimensions’ of their specific postmodernism(s), and explore how these dichotomous perspectives play out in their respective works.

4.1.b. Jean-François Lyotard and the Crisis of Narratives

In his ‘Introduction’ to The Postmodern Condition, Jean-François Lyotard argues that postmodernism is a response to an apparent crisis of confidence in traditional philosophical narratives due to a sustained attack on the problematic truth claims of metaphysics, stating that: “I have decided to use the word postmodern to describe that condition [...] it designates the state of our culture following the transformations which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the game rules for science, literature, and the arts. The present study will place these transformations in the context of the crisis of narratives” (1984:xxiii). The continued critical focus on metaphysics reached its climax with post-structuralism and deconstruction, whereby deterministic philosophical discourses — and the supposedly self-present subject — were implicated in the problematics of arbitrary and non-essential nature of language. Lyotard views the contemporary crisis of postmodernism as a result of the appreciation of the metaphysical nature of various ‘metanarratives’ which participated in the legitimation of the ‘grand narratives’ of science, art and philosophy, explaining that:
[I]f a metanarrative implying a philosophy of history is used to legitimate knowledge, questions are raised concerning the validity of the institutions governing the social bond: these must be legitimated as well. Thus justice is consigned to the grand narrative in the same way as truth. Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it. To the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds, most notably, the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the past relied on it. The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal (1984:xxiv).

Thus, Lyotard argues that the ‘postmodern condition’ is a result of an increased scepticism towards the metaphysical certitude of those ‘grand narratives’ that have traditionally determined the validity of philosophy and the certitude of subjectivity. However, there exists a certain political bias in his view, for much like Camus before him, he had become frustrated by post-war French Communism arguing in ‘Re-Writing Modernity,’ that: “Today we know that the October Revolution, as well as all revolutions, brought about or carried on the same hell on behalf of Marxism. It has repeated the alienation of man, though Marxists claim they were working for disalienation” (1987:6). This perspective is double edged as it also takes aim at Fredric Jameson and his belief that the return of such ‘grand narratives’ as Marxism, would cure the ills of the postmodern subject. Furthermore, we see yet another theorist eagerly interpellating this term, and attempt to turn this supposedly anti-metaphysical approach to theory into yet another ‘grand narrative.’

It is important to note that despite Lyotard’s attack on certain grand narratives, he was still guilty of determinism when arguing that rather than postmodernism superseding and replacing modernism in toto, it in fact predated it. He explains this perspective in ‘Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism.’

What, then, is the postmodern? What place does it or does it not occupy in the vertiginous work of the questions hurled at the rules of image and imagination? It is undoubtedly a part of the modern. All that has been received if only yesterday (modo, modo Petronius used to say), must be suspected [a] work of art becomes modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant (1983:338-39).
Lyotard argues that rather than following modernism — as the prefix ‘post-’ would suggest — this anti-metaphysical narrative is designed to overturn and re-write — what he refers to as *récrit* — the totalising grand narratives of modernism. In ‘Re-Writing Modernity’ he states that: “As you know, I have made use of the word ‘postmodern:’ it was but a provocative way to put the struggle in the foreground of the field of knowledge. Postmodernity is not a new age, it is the re-writing of some key features modernity had tried or pretended to gain, particularly in founding its legitimation upon the purpose of the general emancipation of mankind. But such a re-writing, as has already been said, was for a long time active of modernity itself” (1987:8-9).

Therefore, Lyotard proposes an apparent overlap between modernism and postmodernism, indicating that the latter is in fact a ‘re-writing’ and continuation of the humanistic narratives which will lead to a new positive form of modernism. As Bill Readings notes in *Introducing Lyotard*: “Lyotard refuses to think of the postmodern as a new ‘now,’ a look, the latest fashionable attitude. This has made Lyotard into a rather uncomfortable bedfellow with other theorists of the postmodern, who tend to be rather more interested in apocalyptic announcements about the end of modernity” (1991:54). Thus, in Lyotard we see a deterministically optimistic attitude toward postmodernism, and the inevitable ‘paralogic’ proliferation of ‘little narratives’ over oppressive totalitarian grand narratives. That Lyotard hopes for a modernism free of totalitarianism and scepticism with the advent of postmodernism is made clear when he proclaims in ‘Note on the Meaning of ‘Post-,’” that if there is an answer to the question, ‘What is postmodernism?” then: “The answer is: Let us wage war on totality; let us be witness to the unpresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name” (1983:341). That is, the honour of a new determinism in the form of yet another metaphysical narrative beget by the progenitor postmodernism!
4.1.c. Fredric Jameson’s Anti-Postmodern Metaphysics

In contrast to Lyotard’s positive view of postmodernism we find the virulently anti-postmodern position of Fredric Jameson who views this new ‘condition’ as a complete break with the traditions of high modernism. In his ‘Forward’ to *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson appears keen to avoid the confusion surrounding this term arguing that: “I have not tried to systemize a usage or to impose any conveniently coherent thumbnail meaning, for the concept is not merely contested, it is also internally conflicted and contradictory” (1991:xxii). However, Jameson moves seamlessly from this proposition and quickly enters the debate by arguing deterministically that postmodernism is an effect of post-industrial, or ‘late-capitalist’ production. He argues that the conjoining of this contemporary ‘mode of production’ with an increased philosophical scepticism resulting from French deconstruction, the ‘death of man,’ the rise of schizophrenia and pastiche in place of self-present subjectivity and originality of art, acts as the last phase in the inevitable rise of the Marxist grand narrative. The theme of a loss of metaphysical certitude is replete in Jameson’s work, especially in relation to the demise of strictly delimited academic disciplines at the hands of literary criticism. He articulates this point in ‘Postmodernism and Consumer Society’ stating that:

A generation ago there was still a technical discourse of professional philosophy — the great systems of Sartre or the phenomenologists, the work of Wittgenstein or analytical or common language philosophy — alongside which one could still distinguish that quite different discourse of the other academic disciplines — of political science, for example, or sociology or literary criticism. Today, increasingly, we have a kind of writing simply called ‘theory’ which is all of or none of those things at once. This kind of new discourse, generally associated with France, and so-called French theory, is becoming widespread and marks the end of philosophy as such […] and I will suggest that such ‘theoretical discourse’ is also to be numbered among the manifestations of postmodernism (1998:3).

Apart from the continuing tendency to conflate deconstruction with postmodernism, Jameson’s perspective ignores the recurrent crisis of philosophy and the diminished subject seen clearly in the phenomenology of Husserl, the existential nihilism of Sartre,
and with Wittgenstein’s doubts regarding his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Thus, the rigorous philosophical disciplines Jameson holds as prime examples of modernist ‘grand narratives,’ are themselves theoretical responses to perceived crises in culture and philosophy. Furthermore, that all of these approaches invariably failed to escape this *aporia*, makes Jameson’s call for a return to this mythical utopia of arbitrary metaphysical discourses naïvely problematic.

While not content to lament the apparent ‘death of philosophy,’ Jameson carries out an extensive eulogy to the recently deceased self-present subject, who he sees as the victim of the end of rigid modernist disciplines and resultant loss of historicity, as late-capitalist production consumes itself and brings the demise of originality of art, history and subjectivity, only to be replaced with a regurgitated culture of ‘pastiche,’ and referent free ‘schizophrenic’ postmodern subjects. He articulates this eulogy to the modernist individual further in ‘Postmodernism and Consumer Society’ arguing that:

[W]e have to introduce a new piece into the puzzle, which may help to explain why classical modernism is a thing of the past and why postmodernism should have taken its place. This new component is what is generally called the ‘death of the subject’ or, to say it in more conventional language, the end of individualism as such. The great modernisms were, as we have said, predicated on the invention of a personal, private style, as unmistakable as your fingerprint, as incomparable as your own body. But this means that the modernist aesthetic is in some way organically linked to the conception of a unique self and private identity, a unique personality and individuality, which can be expected to generate its own unique vision of the world and to forge its own unique, unmistakable style. Yet from today, any number of distinct perspectives, the social theorists, the psychoanalysts, even the linguists, not to speak of those of us who work in the area of culture and formal change, are all exploring the notion that this kind of individualism and personal identity is a thing of the past; that the old individual or individualist subject is ‘dead;’ and that one might even describe the concept of the unique individual and the theoretical basis of individualism as ideological (1998:5-6).

Interestingly, Jameson’s perspective of the postmodern subject in many ways resembles my own premise of the *a priori* diminished subject. However, while Jameson views this crisis as temporally specific to postmodernism, I would argue that this is an ineluctable aspect of subjectivity and not as a result of either the cultural ‘logic’ of late-capitalism, or contemporary theory. Furthermore, despite my teleology providing this ‘fragmented’
and divided subject with temporal *loci* that both predate, and inhabit modernism, Jameson argues determinedly that originality and progress in cultural production and subjectivity have only recently come to an end. In *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* he makes this explicit arguing that: “I take it as axiomatic that ‘modernist history’ is the first casualty and mysterious absence of the postmodernism period […] the notion of progress and *telos* remained alive and well up until very recent times indeed” (1991:xii). Therefore, we see the shadow of metaphysics loom large on Jameson’s office wall, as he bemoans the ‘depthlessness’ of contemporary culture, while upholding a metaphysical ideal of the specialised discourses of high modernism.

4.1.d. Postmodern Literature? — A Loose Canon!

Unfortunately, ‘postmodernism’ is a term *bon a tout faire*. I have the impression that it is applied today to anything the user of the term happens to like. Further, there seems to be an attempt to make it increasingly retroactive: first it was apparently applied to certain writers or artists active in the last twenty years, then gradually it reached the beginning of the century, then still further back. And this reverse procedure continues; soon the postmodern category will include Homer.


Having not only called into question the notion of a temporally specific crisis of subjectivity, and the recurrent scepticism towards the metaphysical pursuits of philosophy, I shall now discuss the idea of a ‘postmodern literature’ and certain negative responses to this ‘loose’ canon. Given that the concept of postmodernism has been proven problematic, it follows that applying this epithet to contemporary literature is equally questionable, and when one begins to investigate the supposed stylistic make-up of this canon then the inherent contradictions become manifest. In his ‘POSTFACE,’ Hassan immediately undermines the possibility of a temporally specific literary archetype that can be attributed to postmodernism when he points out that: “we continually discover ‘antecedents’ of postmodernism — in Sterne, Sade, Blake […] Bataille […] and Kafka. What this really indicates is that we have created in our mind a model of postmodernism, a particular typology of culture and imagination, and have
proceeded to ‘rediscover’ the affinities of various authors and different moments with that model’ (1995:264-5). Thus, while Hassan clearly recognises the subjective nature of canon formation, he sets about establishing a series of stylistic elements that can be classified postmodern, and then transcends the contemporary realm to include both modern and pre-modern texts in this category — something Lyotard would approve of, but Jameson would decry. Adam Roberts explains Hassan’s prerogative stating that he:

[L]abels this new writing ‘postmodern,’ but also insists that this term does not describe a new period in literature, but rather a particular sort of literature that has been present in Western culture for several hundred years, lurking in the background as it were. In particular, modernism contained within it, as a sort of more extreme version of itself, the thing that Hassan calls postmodernism [that] involves resistance, negation, the spirit of ‘unmaking’ that Hassan calls the ‘literature of silence.’ Actually, modernism is also concerned with this for Hassan, but postmodernism is more self-reflexive and ironic about this project, more indeterminate and sometimes more playful. What this means is that the critics following Hassan need not limit their studies of postmodernism to works published in the later third of the twentieth century; they can write (and some have) studies of ‘postmodern modernism,’ ‘postmodern Renaissance drama,’ and the like (2000:113-114).

As with the a priori nature of diminished subject undermining the notion of a recently fragmented postmodern subject, many of the stylistic elements that apparently make up postmodern literature can be attributed to texts that predate this period, thus questioning any deterministic canon of contemporary fiction and any value judgments thereof. As Robert Cohen, explains in his paper ‘Do Postmodern Genres Exist?’ “Ihab Hassan is correct in noting that what we call ‘postmodern’ writing is espied in an earlier time, but eighteenth-century genres exhibited some of the same features. We rename these features in terms of our critical language, but Tristam Shandy’s marbled pages were transgressions then as now as were the foregrounding of literary artifice [and] non-linear narration […] The basis for a genre theory of mixed forms or shared generic features is as old as Aristotle’s comparison of tragedy and epic” (1999:294). That is, Hassan appears to have carried out a form of theoretical revisionism, whereby the stylistic elements of ‘postmodern fiction’ are attributed to pre-postmodern literature, creating an expanded ‘canon’ and legitimating an economy of academic research that
conveniently overcomes the limitation of the study of contemporary texts alone.

This process of legitimation has also been noted by Ian Gregson in *Postmodern Literature*, despite being guilty of doing so himself: “A concept of what it is to be a postmodernist author is widespread in academic circles and this has led to courses being invented on the basis of that concept. There is a profound paradox underlying this because postmodernism is supposed to be about rejecting canons and subverting orthodoxies of all kinds — yet it has managed to impose this orthodoxy with awesome effectiveness” (2004:viii-xiv). That is, despite the lack of consensus regarding a definition of postmodernism — and the eclectic and dubious nature of a literature which has been attributed to it — we see this problematic theoretical and cultural discourse infiltrating all aspects of contemporary society, and become legitimated by the self-perpetuating ivory towers of academia.

4.2.a. The Postmodernism Condition, Contemporary Literature and Generation X

This book studies twenty-six writers, necessarily with a certain nostalgia, since I seek to isolate the qualities that made these authors canonical, that is, authoritative in our culture. ‘Aesthetic value’ is sometimes regarded as a suggestion of Immanuel Kant’s rather than an actuality, but that has not been my experience during a lifetime of reading. Things have however fallen apart, the centre has not held, and mere anarchy is in the process of being unleashed upon what used to be called ‘the learned world.’


Most people from outside Generation X condemn the twentysomethings as illiterate, unmotivated, and apathetic couch potatoes: We appear, apparently, to have no career goals, no cultural pride, no political ideology, no family values, and no discernible ambitions […] Unable to see through the guise of apathy and anger worn […] and unable to understand what’s beneath it if they could, the many chroniclers of Generation X have reduced us to, at best, a market segment and, at worst, the downfall of the Western world.


A high proportion of what passes for intellectual discourse regarding contemporary subjectivity and literature appears to suffer from a bad case of glib generalisation and frantic literalism. The majority of the critical engagement with recent theory and culture has been dominated by a ‘howl’ of derision and fear, following the malignant
appropriation, and demonising, of post-structuralist theories of language and subjectivity by postmodern writers and the mainstream media. A metaphysically comforting *a priori* perspective of society and identity has been undermined by a determined (mis)reading of Derrida’s theories of deconstruction, bringing about the death of the author, the subject, philosophy, originality in art and literature, and the demise of high modernism, leading to calls for the return of the pre-eminent individual, secure on its self-present throne. Yet, as we have seen, this postmodern wasteland — littered with the remains of the self-present subject — is also a site of contestation between those calling for the return of humanist grand narratives, and those eager to explore the ‘little narratives’ of this new and exciting terrain.

In his text *Gangland: Cultural Elites and the New Generationalism* Mark Davis suggests that this negative perspective is the result of a ‘new generationalism’ leading certain social commentators to view contemporary culture and subjectivity as meaningless and ‘anarchic,’ and to call for the preservation of the ‘grand-narratives’ of the dominant cultural discourses. This attitude can be seen with Bloom’s lament to the future of the privileged position of *The Western Canon* in the face of such anarchy. This fear of the loss of cultural certitude and the fragmentation of subjectivity has led, what Davis refers to as the ‘old generation,’ to view with suspicion the approaches of deconstruction and post-structuralism:

Somewhere out the back there must be a big scrap heap. That’s where all the ‘dead white males’ are. It’s where all the lovers of literature are too. And the authors. Even the Bard himself, complete with nasty gunshot wound. History is out there — stone cold dead, its fans with nothing left to do but pick over a carcass. […] In this palace of dead icons, truth and beauty have pride of place, alongside the old-fashioned humanities, and any possibility of normal relations between men and women. Or so they say, the bevy of prominent social commentators, writers, reviewers and critics […] And who’s behind all this? Like a class full of dutiful primary-school children, we’re all supposed to know by now: the ‘big, bad, wolf’ — of cultural studies practitioners, poststructuralists, feminists and postmodernists (1999:155-6).

Rather than viewing these much-maligned theoretical practices as empowering tools to defamiliarise seemingly *a priori* cultural discourses in a positive manner, these
approaches are viewed as anti-humanist. This accusation arises despite the problematic arbitrary nature of all hegemonic practices and due to their inherent textual nature, leading them to be seen by many as oppressive and dictatorial as they often suppress the counter-discursive activities of marginal groups. However, what at first appears to be anti-humanist can be viewed as a call for a revision of humanism, for rather than being purely negative, these often-derided approaches defamiliarise — rather than interpellate as a priori — subjectivity and society, highlighting our unavoidable complicity with hegemonic discourses.\textsuperscript{12} This at once decentres and emancipates the subject by illuminating the limits these cultural practices place on self-expression and, rather than viewing them as de rigueur, proposes the condition of the possibility of change.

This anti-humanist perspective dominates critical discussions of contemporary discourse and articulates a view that conflates post-structuralism and deconstruction as postmodern, yet the positive possible outcomes of deconstruction as an approach for the analysis of subjectivity are also well argued. In \textit{The Politics of Postmodernism}, Linda Hutcheon — while evoking Theodore Adorno — argues that the autonomy of the individual in capitalist society is in need of questioning, stating that: “In a capitalist context, as Adorno argued, the pretence of individualism (and thus, of choice) is in fact proportional to the ‘liquidation of the individual’ (1978:280) in mass manipulation, carried out, of course, in the name of democratic ideals” (1990:13). With this view, it can be argued that the anti-humanist critiques of post-structuralism and deconstruction are problematic, while for Hutcheon, the humanist ideal of the self-present individual in capitalist society is already under suspicion due to the acceptance of certain discursive rules and roles therein, which, to a greater or lesser degree, deny the subject its implied freedom. Furthermore, she points out that if: “postmodernism is identified with a ‘decentring’ of this particular notion of the individual, then both humanist and capitalist notions of selfhood or subjectivity will necessarily be called into question” (13).
Therefore, rather than being anti-humanist, deconstruction defamiliarises the non-essential limiting discourses of contemporary culture, something that has struck a chord with many who have appropriated this approach in order to explore certain counter-discursive expressions of subjectivity.

A further problem encountered with any discussion of contemporary subjectivity is that this association with the ‘postmodern condition’ has not only resulted in a dominant perspective of the contemporary subject as fragmented and ‘decentred,’ it has apparently led to a loss of originality in art, with consumer culture, pastiche and parody becoming the dominant (un)creative forms of expression. As such, contemporary works of literature that appropriate theories of deconstruction are seen as representations of this ‘condition’ par excellence. In James Annesley’s Blank Fictions — an investigation into contemporary American literature — we find a variety of epithets given to contemporary works of fiction now synonymous with the postmodern canon, such as: “the ‘fiction of insurgency,’ ‘new narrative,’ ‘blank generation fiction,’ ‘downtown writing,’ ‘punk fiction,’ and … ‘blank fiction’” (1998:2). Annesley goes on to explain how his favoured expression, ‘blank fiction,’ represents a ‘blank scene’ that negatively reflects contemporary society:

One view suggests that [certain] disturbing thematics are the product of an ‘apocalypse culture,’ the reflexive gestures of a society torn by millenial angst. Other versions see a culture dominated by a ‘Generation X,’ slackers whose indifference is reflected in the atomised, nihilistic world-view articulated in these texts. An alternative account speculates about the possible existence of some kind of radical aesthetic that finds expression in the extreme, and marginal pronouncements. More familiar and, perhaps, more persuasive is the well-worn suggestion that this modern mood can be explained in relation to ‘postmodern culture.’ Blank fictions are read, in these terms, as the product of a postmodern condition (3).

Outlining the various attributes of ‘blank fiction,’ Annesley also indicates the difficulties in trying to define and pigeonhole contemporary literature in fixed terms. Although I will refer to Annesley’s critical position later, for the moment I am interested in his second and fourth positions — that is, the idea that contemporary
literature belongs to ‘Generation X,’ or a ‘slacker generation,’ and that it can be seen as a reflection of the ‘postmodern condition.’ However, I will still have a view to Annesley’s third definition of ‘blank fiction’ as a ‘radical aesthetic’ and will investigate this proposition at a later stage.

Mark Davis’ proposition of ‘new generationalism’ has been given repeated credence among many younger writers, such as Douglas Rushkoff — author, editor and contributor to the *Gen X Reader* — who pinpoints the rejection of contemporary society by the so-called ‘slacker’ generation as a reaction to the ideologies of the baby boomers — a demographic born roughly between 1945-60. Rushkoff believes that the supposed nihilism and apathy of the ‘Why Me?’ generation is because the ideal world promised to the ‘baby busters’ — those born between 1961-71 — by their ‘boomer’ elders, does not exist, and that this apathy stems from a frustrating lack of alternatives. As Rushkoff points out the GenXers stood back:

[A]s baby boomers went to college, got great jobs, crashed the economy, and left us with nothing but McJobs — low wage menial employment or ‘temping’ — for their vastly overqualified little brothers and sisters. We watched rock’n’roll take over the nation and then dry up like Mick Jagger before we got to college. We watched a generation drop acid and turn on, only to find the atmosphere of ‘just say no’ and mandatory prison sentences by the time we were old enough to care for a buzz now and again. We watched the sexual revolution evolve into forced celibacy as the many excesses of the 1970s and 1980s rotted into the sexually transmitted diseases of our 1990s (1994:5).

It is possible to argue, as Rushkoff does, that ‘slacker’ culture is a deliberate political response to an inherited world, and that the derision levelled against ‘Gen X’ is an expression of guilt, and the fear of reprisal, by the elder demographic. As he indicates, many social critics of contemporary culture and literature are themselves the spokespeople of the ‘baby boomer’ generation. By rejecting contemporary consumer society and ‘dropping-out’ the ‘slacker’ rejects what the ‘boomers’ stand for, leading the latter to criticise contemporary culture as nihilistic and apathetic.
In *Gangland*, Davis goes so far as to reject the term postmodernism altogether — something not that uncommon — seeing it as a concept fraught with inherent limitations which deny the possibility of any positive or political creativity in contemporary theory and art, stating that:

I don’t think it’s possible to be ‘for’ or ‘against’ postmodernism […] I don’t regard postmodernism as any one thing, or as having any intrinsic qualities, whether it be a style or a set of ideas. But I do think that, as a way of describing what is happening now, it has become a disabling term. In particular, the notion of the future that it proffers, no matter who is doing the talking, is a kind of endism. It speaks of a world where everything is ‘post;’ where all the best things are already done […] I don’t think, though, that such theorists have come to grips with contemporary life. The terms offered up by the postmodern debate don’t adequately describe the new cultural forms and trends […] being produced everywhere you look, with a sheer energy that is daunting (1999:263-4).

It is Davis’ disavowal of this perspective of ‘post-’modernism, and his optimistic view of contemporary ‘cultural forms,’ that I shall now turn to. The apathetic nihilism of Generation X and the fragmentation of the subject suffering from the so-called ‘postmodern condition,’ is expressed by Eric Lui in his paper ‘The End of Progress,’ in which he responds to the negative attitude of the ‘baby boomers’ towards contemporary culture and literature suggesting that: “Apocalyptic visions and dark millennial predictions abound. The end of history. The end of progress. The end of equality. Even something as ostensibly positive as the end of the Cold War has a bittersweet tinge, because for the life of us, no one in America today can get a handle on the big question, ‘What next?’ We are post-ideological, even post-modern. But we are not yet ‘pre’-anything” (1994:73). Although, this perspective is one that prescribes criticisms of an apathetic and nihilistic postmodern contemporary culture that embraces the loss of certitude, and a metaphysical perception of the tangible and transcendental, it does pose the question ‘What next?’
4.2.b. The Argument for Contemporary Literature

Having examined problematic negative generalisations regarding contemporary literature and culture, and the tendency to view postmodernism as a totalising discourse, I will now carry out a defence of certain contemporary ‘culture forms’ that are both inherently creative and political, and in fact continue a long tradition of counter-discursive literature. Throughout this atemporal teleology of the diminished subject I have included a discussion of the transgression of the deterministic divide between philosophy and literature, and as seen with the ‘wrong turn’ we have inherited a tradition of philosophical and literary theory that valorises the rhetoric and the supposed clarity of the former, and mistrusts the metaphoric nature of the latter. However, this demarcation has been proved tenuous, as shown with the textual nature of deconstruction and post-structuralist approaches, whereby no discursive formation is prioritised over another, thus blurring the boundaries between the two. In Postmodernism and Popular Culture, John Docker states that: “the difference between fiction and non-fiction lies not so much in possession of truth […] but, in the case of scholarly writing, in the declared presence of certain agreed conventions and protocols […] Post-structuralism has raised for us the difference of non-fiction and fiction as permanent question, enigma, the insoluble, aporia” (1994:144). Like Docker, it is my proposition that post-structuralism and deconstruction both successfully and usefully undermine these limiting ‘conventions and protocols.’

With a view to the reduced import of the rhetorical over supposedly less rigorous modes of expression, many texts can be viewed as being more than generically determined works of literature, and instead transcend the boundaries between these discursive forms, thus blurring the distinction between theory and practice. In Postmodern Literary Theory: An Introduction, Niall Lucy emphasises the deterministic limitations of the ‘wrong-turn,’ as seen in the speech versus writing debate, stating that:
In order to count as literature [...] any instance of writing has to be seen to display some order of values belonging to speech (originality, truth, sincerity, mastery, courage and so on): it cannot simply ‘be’ writing in the strict or Platonic sense. For this reason literature is never only just that. It is always at the same time writing-in-general, such that any instance of literary writing-in-particular could, under certain circumstances be (mis)taken for an example of philosophical, political, historical, scientific or other writing (1997:125).

That is, Lucy proposes that literature need not be judged as a particular instance of writing in black and white terms, but can be read as an instance of philosophy — its traditional other — and rather than reinforcing these demarcations, I believe that by virtue of its arbitrary nature a work of literature always transcends metaphysical boundaries. As seen with the philosophical implications of the fictional work of Sartre and Camus, this is nothing new. However, what is of interest here is that the inherent possibility of intertextual and interdisciplinary discourses coexisting in any given text, is something which seems to have been conveniently overlooked in predominant arguments that deride contemporary literature as lacking value and originality.

This point has not escaped the notice of Linda Hutcheon who, in the *Politics of Postmodernism*, argues that the inherent philosophical nature of literature is being explored to a greater extent due to the advent of postmodernism:

There are other kinds of border tension in the postmodern too: the ones created by the transgression of the boundaries between genres, between disciplines or discourses, between high and mass culture, and most problematically, perhaps, between practice and theory. While there is arguably never any practice without theory, an overtly theoretical component has become a notable aspect of postmodern art, displayed within the works themselves as well as in the artists’ statements about their work. The postmodern artist is no longer the inarticulate, silent, alienated creator of the romantic/modernist tradition. Nor is the theorist the dry, detached, dispassionate writer of the academic tradition (1990:18-19).

That is, for Hutcheon, within ‘postmodern literature’ we see an overtly political and philosophical content. Furthermore, this recognition of the inherent confusion of discursive boundaries has had a corresponding effect with many theoreticians adopting literary styles for their theoretical and critical work, something most notably seen in the latter works of Roland Barthes. Despite a clear understanding of the interdisciplinary
nature of all forms of writing, contemporary literature and the work of the ‘blank
generation’ of writers is still criticised and devalued as nihilistic, morally bankrupt and
apolitical. However, a view of postmodernism and contemporary literature as both
philosophical and political does have validity among certain critics and commentators.

Referring to Linda Hutcheon in his ‘Introduction’ to Postmodernism and Contemporary
Fiction, Smyth emphasises this point when discussing her notion of ‘historiographic
metafiction’ — a term she uses to discuss ‘postmodern texts’ — stating that she:
“provides a convincing demonstration of the politically liberating effects of postmodern
writing as a counterblast to the Eagleton/Jameson position. For her, postmodernism is
‘resolutely historical, and inescapably political,’ [...] ‘historiographic metafiction’
encompasses oppositional texts which are both self-reflexive and historical,
problematising the dominant ideology” (1991:12). While this runs counter to Jameson’s
perspective of the loss of historicity — and it is possible that much of what passes for
postmodern literature may well be ‘inescapably political’ — it remains true that this
‘problematising’ of cultural formations is predominantly viewed as having counter-
discursive tendencies due to the open ended aporia associated with deconstruction.

Despite these counter-arguments to the negative perspectives of contemporary
theory and literature, I believe that it is wrong to presuppose that the deconstruction of
traditional grand narratives — such as the metaphysics of presence — and the resultant
aporia is necessarily a nihilistic activity. Davis gives us cause to return to the problems
associated with the notion of postmodernism when he argues that:

Postmodernism may or may not be a handy way of speaking about contemporary
cultural conditions, but it doesn’t provide much in the way of useful narratives for a
hopeful future. One thing that ‘post’ addicts of all colours have not been able to
anticipate is the remarkable degree of political engagement on the part of the young.
Younger people have never been more serious about issues, despite their cynicism
about mainstream politics and the fodder served up in the mainstream news and
current-affairs programmes and in the newspapers. That we live in postmodern times
has not resulted in the atomisation of all political reflexes or disabled the will to
organise, as some critics and theorists of postmodernity have predicted. Nor has it
resulted in the empty, ‘relativistic’ nihilism that many conservatives take as an article
of faith. This complex, multi-layered world might be confusing and disquieting for some, but younger people, it seems to me, are by and large making sense of it. They are familiar, even comfortable, with the contingency (1999:264).

That is, for Davis the term postmodernism is inherently problematic, and argues that the fears of those who view the world in light of this ‘post-’ prefix are unfounded. Furthermore, he believes that the generation of supposed ‘slackers’ has been able to make sense of this decentred world and find room for creative and political engagement with it. Perhaps what we are witnessing is a generation accepting the aporia of the fallacy of metaphysical discourses and self-present subjectivity, and embracing the diversity of ‘little narratives’ on a creative and personal level, leading to innovative and exciting explorations of this terrain. I would argue then, that a perspective of contemporary subjectivity as inherently diminished illuminates this aporia as an a priori aspect of being rather than constituting a temporally specific affliction, and that this realisation has encouraged divergent explorations of alternative expressions of contemporaneous individuality to those of dominant discursive practices.

This optimistic perspective of contemporary theory and literature — although still reliant on the dubious rubric postmodernism — is ironically a repeated exception to the predominant criticisms. In ‘Postmodernism; A Preface:’ — his introduction to the seminal, Postmodern Culture, which includes works by Lyotard and Habermas — Hal Foster argues that the positive possibilities of ‘postmodern’ deconstruction outweigh the predominant nihilistic perspective of it as an ‘anti-aesthetic’ determinedly opposed to high modernism, explaining that:

It was modernism that was marked by such ‘negations,’ espoused in the anarchic hope of an ‘emancipatory effect’ or in the utopian dream of a time of pure presence, a space beyond representation. This is not the case here: all these critics take for granted that we are never outside representation — or rather, never outside its politics. Here then, the ‘anti-aesthetic’ is the sign not of a modern nihilism [-] but rather of a critique which destructures the order of representations in order to re-inscribe them (1985:xv).
That is, despite determining a clear ‘postmodernism’ period, Foster’s perspective clearly supports a view of contemporary art and theory as far removed from the nihilistic instrument of doom that destroyed the modernist grand narratives of art and subjectivity, and brought about the end of deterministic science and philosophy that had attempted to fill the metaphysical void left with the ‘death of God.’ Rather than viewing contemporary theory and literature as inherently negative, we see that it always already exhibits an awareness of the a priori aporia of representation contained in this argument, and of the impossibility of returning to a historically specific period wherein the individual could attain this metaphysical certitude of subjectivity. Rather than postmodernism bringing about the demise of the self-present subject of high modernism, the diminished subject can be seen to flourish as anterior and posterior to both the modernist and postmodernist periods. This perspective is duly noted by Hutcheon who argues that this predominantly negative view of all elements of contemporary culture — located under the banner of postmodernism — is the result of an increasingly vitriolic conservative backlash, stating that: “For the neoconservative critic, postmodernism is fundamentally destabilizing, a threat to the preservation of tradition (and the status quo)” (1990:16). Therefore, it could be argued then that postmodernism is a chimera, a metaphysical construct wherein these supposed ‘neoconservatives’ can collate, and critique, any counter-discursive expressions of subjectivity that may undermine the metaphysical comfort and security of the long established grand narratives of literature, philosophy, religion and more recently and more frequently, that of the capitalist economy.

4.2.c. Predating postmodern subjectivity

The questionable application of the term postmodernism to contemporary theory and literature becomes more apparent when it is compared to temporally disparate texts that not only predate this epithet, but also defamiliarise the subject in a similar manner. This
theme of a crisis of subjectivity can be found clearly in existential texts — such as Camus’ *The Outsider* and Sartre’s *Nausea* — written long before the notion of a ‘postmodern condition’ became accepted in theoretical circles and legitimated by the wider community. That certain postmodern characteristics are not limited to contemporary fiction alone but clearly predate them, is supported by Edmund Smyth who states that: “As more than one commentator has observed, the evaluative criteria for deciding upon the admission of a work into [a] postmodernist canon can be applied to almost any literary work from any given ‘period’ [a] concern with fictionality and self-consciousness has of course been a feature of the novel since its very inception” (1991:11). With this in mind, and having explained that any attempt to determine a postmodern canon in concrete terms is problematic, I will now carry out a brief investigation into a pre-postmodern text whose content has much in common with contemporary views of the fragmented postmodern subject.

In his seminal 1956 text *The Outsider*, Colin Wilson carries out an extensive investigation into the history of the disaffected outsider in fiction. My interest in this text not only stems from his interest in existential works of literature, but because my own view of the diminished subject and contemporary literature has many similarities with his depiction of this ‘outsider.’ In his discussion of Barbusse’s *L’Enfer* Wilson states that a sense of ‘unreality’ is what defines the object of his study:

> And once a man has seen it, the world can never afterwards be quite the same straightforward place. Barbusse has shown us that the Outsider is a man who cannot live in the comfortable, insulated world of the bourgeois, accepting what he sees and touches as reality. ‘He sees too deep and too much,’ and what he sees is essentially *chaos*. For the bourgeois, the world is a fundamentally an ordered place, with a disturbing element of the irrational, the terrifying, which his preoccupation with the present usually permits him to ignore. For the Outsider, the world is not rational, not orderly. When he asserts this sense of anarchy […] it is a distressing sense that *truth must be told at all costs*, otherwise there can be no hope for an ultimate restoration of order. Even if there seems to be no room for hope, truth must be told […] The Outsider is a man who has awakened to *chaos* (1956:25).
There are many parallels here with my own discussion of contemporary subjectivity, post-structuralism and deconstruction, for whereas Barbusse’s character attempts to rail against the perceived rationality and order of bourgeois life, the theorists discussed in my teleology are responding to the failed attempts of the philosophical tradition to provide the metaphysics of presence for language and subjectivity. His sense of chaos and anarchy could be compared to the demise of the ‘grand narratives’ of religion, philosophy and science, and the concept of the contemporary subject suffering from fragmentation of the postmodern condition. However, his desire to tell the truth about the supposed chaos of existence is what brings him closest to my perception of the diminished subject, for he recognises that the world is not ordered and must speak out. His need for an ‘ultimate restoration of order,’ and the awareness of chaos, could be read as an attempt to find new discourses opposed to the bourgeois, a possible return to the metaphysics of comfort, or perhaps a desire to defamiliarise the problems associated with dominant cultural formations.

Wilson goes on to describe the ‘outsider’ in greater detail allowing me to draw even more parallels with my own investigations into the diminished subject, when he states that the Outsider is: “preoccupied with sex, with crime, with disease […] The Outsider’s case against society is very clear. All men and women have these dangerous, unnameable impulses, yet they keep up a pretence, to themselves, to others; their respectability, their philosophy, their religion, are all attempts to gloss over, to make look civilized and rational something that is savage, unorganized, irrational. He is an Outsider because he stands for Truth. This is his case. But it is weakened by his obvious abnormality, his introversion. It looks, in fact, like an attempt at self-justification by a man who knows himself to be degenerate, diseased, self-divided” (23-4). This historical perspective of the introverted and divided individual not only emphasises a proposition of the diminished subject, it undermines the notion that deconstruction and
postmodernism alone have brought about the end of self-presence as we find Barbusse’s character exhibiting many symptoms of the postmodern condition — and comparable to the subject suffering the moral and philosophical fall-out of deconstruction — left with a preoccupation with the sordid aspects of contemporary culture, following the end of history, the death of God, the subject, and the author.

Although Wilson is predominantly interested in existential fiction, this in itself does not prevent me from making further comparisons with my own notion of the diminished contemporary subject. As I have already indicated one of the main criticisms levelled against post-structuralism and deconstruction is that of an aporia, the open-ended process of defamiliarisation which, despite highlighting the arbitrary discursive nature of contemporary culture and subjectivity, fails to provide the subject with any tangible alternatives. When discussing Camus’ The Outsider, and Meursault’s impending demise, Wilson states that:

[T]he reason for his indifference is his sense of unreality […] The prospect of death has wakened him up […] It has, admittedly, wakened him up too late as far as he is concerned. But at least it has given him a notion of the meaning of freedom. Freedom is release from unreality. ‘I had been happy and I was happy still,’ but what is the point in being happy if the happiness is hidden from the consciousness by a heavy grime of unreality? Sartre’s later formulations of Meursault’s realization is: ‘Freedom is terror.’ […] Obviously, freedom is not simply being allowed to do what you like; it is intensity of will, and it appears under any circumstances that limit man and arouse his will to more life. […] Its imperative seems to be: Claim your freedom, or else … For the men who fail to claim their freedom there is the sudden catastrophe, the nausea, the trial and execution, the slipping to a lower form of life (40-41).

It is the sense of freedom that comes with the realisation of the ‘unreality’ of any given situation that is important here. If theories of deconstruction and post-structuralism have indicated the manner in which dominant cultural discourses dictate our roles and expressions of self, then the realisation of this unreality brings with it an incredible sense of opportunity. However, it could be argued that this freedom, and loss of certitude, has created a critical backlash by those who are terrorised by the extent of this liberation. Are those calling for a return to the totalising metaphysical discourses of
modernism and certitude of subjectivity, as Sartre would say, merely acting in ‘bad faith’? If so, then it would appear that the postmodern subject is suffering from something akin to an existential crisis, caused by the recognition of the inherently metaphysical nature of all cultural practices, and the meaninglessness of existence.

The problem with embracing this freedom, according to Wilson, is grounded in the need to escape the unreality of existence and make a choice to do something tangible. Here we can see a similarity with the contrition of deconstruction being ineluctably caught up in the system it wishes to defamiliarise, and as he explains:

Freedom posits free-will; that is self-evident. But Will can only operate when there is first a motive. No motive, no willing. But motive is a matter of belief; you would not want to do anything unless you believed it possible and meaningful. And belief must be belief in the existence of something; that is to say, it concerns what is real. So ultimately, freedom depends upon the real. The Outsider’s sense of unreality cuts off his freedom at the root. It is impossible to exercise freedom in an unreal world (49).

For Wilson then, it appears that any attempt to defamiliarise and escape the unreal must necessarily be based on faith, and it is my contestation that the work of deconstruction and the theories of post-structuralism, along with the majority of contemporary literature, all exhibit a belief in the meaningfulness of their activities. I would argue that rather than seeing theories of deconstruction and contemporary literature as nihilistic and aimless, there is a belief that these investigations into subjectivity represent examples of the condition of the possibility of change. Rather than simply determining contemporary cultural discourses as pre-given and unquestionable, certain literary explorations of subjectivity appear to search for meaningful counter-discursive alternatives, and it can be argued that this view undermines the negative attitude toward the validity and importance of contemporary literature, indicating the arbitrary nature of all dominant cultural discourses. Thus, with this reading of Colin Wilson’s *The Outsider*, it becomes apparent that rather than the contemporary subject suffering from a particular temporal condition, this diminishing of the subject can be seen as an inherent aspect of being that varies only in context and intensity.
4.3.a. Apathy, Boredom and Nihilism: — Generation X and Less Than Zero

There’s an emphasis on the extreme, the marginal and the violent. There’s a sense of indifference and indolence. The limits of the human body seem indistinct, blurred by cosmetics, narcotics, disease and brutality. The contemporary American scene is littered with imagery of this kind and it’s hard to escape the conclusion that culture is taking a new direction, exploring new kinds of experiences and moving towards new forms and subjects […] This portrait of American culture can be developed by considering the specific implications raised by its preoccupation with violence, indulgence, sexual excess, decadence, consumerism and commerce.


As an entry point into my discussion of the diminished subject and contemporary literature, Bret Easton Ellis’ debut novel Less Than Zero makes an ideal starting point.

Set in mid-80s Los Angeles, this collection of vignettes follows the activities of a group of twentysomethings over a four-week summer break focusing on the character of Clay, and had an immediate, yet disparate, critical impact upon its release. As Peter Freese explains in ‘Bret Easton Ellis: Entropy in the ‘MTV Novel:’’

While one group of critics expressed their outraged rejection of the book’s juvenile sensationalism conveyed, as one aggrandized reviewer put it, ‘in the inarticulate style of a petulant suburban punk,’ another group celebrated the novel as ‘a weirdly fascinating book’ and greeted it as an authentic literary expression of a new generation. However drastically the critical estimations diverged, two statements were frequently repeated: Less Than Zero was understood as The Catcher in the Rye updated for the eighties, and the slim book was classified as an ‘MTV novel’ (1999:113).

That opinions of Less Than Zero differed so radically is what interests me, for although derided as ‘inarticulate’ and ‘sensational,’ it was also compared with The Catcher in the Rye — J.D. Salinger’s well-respected story of adolescent angst and search for self. Furthermore, that such an ‘authentic literary expression’ could be so articulated by one so young — Ellis was 21 at the time of publication — and mentioned in the same breath as Salinger, suggests that rather than exploring a specific ‘postmodern condition,’ this member of the ‘new generation’ was treading a well worn path. Although the style and context of this so-called ‘MTV novel’ differ to The Catcher in the Rye, the stories of Clay and Holden Caulfield are very similar.
In light of my discussion of the supposed lack of content in the novels of ‘generation X,’ that Ellis’ novel received this divergent critical attention reflects the difficulties in the reception of what could be classified, in Barthes’ terms, a ‘writerly’ text. Much of this criticism was based on the tendency to conflate author and character, and the controversy surrounding its extreme subject matter. As Mark Davis points out many: “complain that there is little room for metaphor and experimentation in recent culture; meanwhile its contexts and subtleties remain unread. Novels such as Bret Easton Ellis’s [sic] *Less Than Zero* and *American Psycho*, which attempted to be satires as well as social documents, have been treated as literal prescriptions for moral decline” (1999:14). The fact that *Less Than Zero* received such vehement critical and moral appraisals reinforces the dominant view that youth culture is apathetic, apolitical, amoral and above all dangerous. These negative commentators are, in Davis’ view, guilty of generalisation and literalism, whereby the speculative aspects of creative writing have been overlooked and the text taken at face value, while the possibility of social satire and philosophical content is ignored, as contemporary culture and literature become victims of a conservative backlash in politics and morality.

Interestingly, there are also claims that *Less Than Zero* is a classic example of the postmodern text and exhibits all of the characteristics of a younger generation suffering from a clear-cut case of the postmodern condition. As James Annesley points out in *Blank Fictions* Ellis’ novel has been read as representing:

*[T]he postmodern jetset described by Jean-François Lyotard, an impression strengthened by the text’s repeated emphasis on postmodern cultural forms like the geography of Los Angeles, fast food and MTV. These features have fostered approaches that read the text as a simple literalisation of Baudrillard’s hyperreal, or regard it as an image of a postmodern world that seems, from a Jamesonian perspective, all-embracing. *Less Than Zero*, […] is thus identified as a text that simultaneously reflects postmodern conditions while replicating and reproducing those conditions. The text’s description of characters lost in a fluid postmodern culture, an environment in which their reference points appear to have been destroyed, supports this kind of approach and fosters comparisons that link Ellis’s [sic] vision to […] these postmodern theorists (1998:98).*
This reading not only supports the notion of the contemporary subject as suffering from a particular temporal condition — as opposed to my own proposition of the *a priori* diminished subject — it also suggests that the depictions of contemporary American society in *Less Than Zero*, simply ‘replicate’ and legitimate them. This view overlooks the fact that any discussion of discursive formations is immediately caught up in an act of contrition, whereby any critical appraisal must necessarily involve itself in the very discourse it seeks to defamiliarise, or run the risk of becoming non-sense.

Linda Hutcheon explains this problem in *The Politics of Postmodernism*, stating that theorists such as Derrida, Lyotard and Foucault are caught up in their own ‘detoxifying logic,’ and that such complicity is an inevitable aspect of critical discourse, contemporary literature and art. She goes on to state that: “Each of these theoretical perspectives can be argued to be deeply — and knowingly — implicated in that notion of centre they attempt to subvert. It is this paradox which makes them postmodern” (1990:14). Despite this problematic reference to Foucault and Derrida as postmodernists, it is true that post-structuralism and deconstruction highlight the inherent *aporia* involved in the critical act, whereby the discussion of any discursive practice necessarily partakes in the legitimisation of that discourse, yet what is important here is the self-awareness of this contrition. It is my proposition that rather than accepting and ‘interpellating’ dominant cultural discourses, Ellis is aware of this *aporia* and is carrying out a satirical deconstruction through the fictional representation that is Clay, and his attempts to make sense of his meaningless social *milieu*.

Annesley supports this view in his economically determined reading of *Less Than Zero*, which explores the relationship between character and capitalism, and suggests that Ellis is carrying out a negative appraisal of capitalist culture. However, for Annesley, Ellis’ constant reference to consumer items is not simply an act of contrition,
but rather: “he creates a text that is able to speak about the experience of living in the contemporary world by using the language of that world” (1998:92-93), and argues that:

Unable to differentiate his writing from the flow of commercial culture, Ellis has produced a commodified prose […] It could even be argued that a novel that includes so much product placement actually strengthens contemporary capitalist structures by promoting further consumerism. Ellis’ commodity-heavy style is, however, not as passive or limited as it first appears […] On the contrary, the commodified style works to highlight the text’s preoccupation with consumer culture and develops a formal dynamic that supports the narrative’s wider negotiations with this complex and contradictory sphere […] he does not simply provide a straightforward mirror-image of this commercial world (94-5).

In other words Ellis’ constant referral to consumer items is not only a political and critical act, but determines Annesley’s own Marxist reading of Less Than Zero, wherein he argues — like Jameson — that rampant consumerism has led to the commodification of subjectivity. Although I respect this reading, I would argue that the theme of the novel is one less of the economic determinism of identity than a complicated investigation into subjectivity that happens to be set in Beverley Hills, and that consumer items are used to highlight the culturally specific aspects of the metaphysics of subjectivity, rather than being used solely to critique capitalist society.

I suggest that such negative appraisals of Less Than Zero and certain sections of contemporary literature have repeatedly been shown to be false, and propose like Annesley that Ellis’ novel can instead be read as a critique of contemporary subjectivity. In addition, readings such as Nicki Sahlin’s, ‘‘But This Road Doesn’t Go Anywhere:’ the Existentialist Dilemma in Less Than Zero,’ not only provide alternative views of Ellis’ novel, they reiterate the proposition that this crisis of subjectivity is far from temporally specific. As Sahlin explains:

Whatever the immediate influences, the elements of existentialism evident in Less Than Zero are most readily seen as a mixture stemming from both Camus and Sartre. Like the ‘stranger’ or ‘outsider’ portrayed in Camus […] Ellis narrator feels intensely alienated, a stranger in familiar territory. Moreover […] he becomes aware of the absurd in its existential sense as his month-long experience tells him that all the practices and values that he previously accepted have no meaning (1991:123).
That is for Sahlin, Clay is far removed from the disaffected youth suffering from the postmodern condition, but rather can be seen as a contemporary ‘outsider’ compared with the great works of existential literature and the ficto-philosophical works of the likes of Sartre and Camus.

Although Sahlin supports the notion of a possible philosophical content in certain works of contemporary fiction, she explains the theme of subjectivity and the search for meaning and freedom in *Less Than Zero* in a far more positive light, suggesting in existential terms that:

Ellis’s [*sic passim*] protagonist also becomes painfully aware of the void or ‘nothingness’ [...] and the resulting anxiety brings him the burden of freedom and responsibility, a burden that is part of both Camus’s and Sartre’s existential schemes. [...] For the most part, a reliance on the most familiar elements of existentialism — alienation and anxiety, increasing awareness of the absurd and nothingness, then, more positively, the awakening to individual responsibility — serves as the best way to approach a novel that is constantly existential in its outlook without being highly sophisticated in a philosophical sense (123-4).

It is his awareness of the absurdity of life in Los Angeles that raises Clay above his peers, for rather than being a simple product of contemporary consumer society — or blindly accepting the chaos and moral degradation around him — Clay exhibits many of the fundamental symptoms of an existential crisis. Although I have only used Sahlin’s ideas briefly, my aim thus far has been to contrast a variety of positions that not only support the proposition of the diminished subject, but also indicate differing philosophical perspectives and value judgements within the same work of fiction, and having achieved this I shall now carry out my own reading of *Less Than Zero* as a clear exploration of the *a priori* aporia of diminished subjectivity.

4.3.b. The Diminished Subject in *Less Than Zero*

People are afraid to merge on freeways in Los Angeles. This is the first thing I hear when I come back to the city. Blair picks me up a LAX and mutters this under her breath [...] She says, ‘People are afraid to merge on the freeways in Los Angeles.’ Though that sentence shouldn’t bother me, it stays in my mind for an uncomfortably long time. Nothing else seems to matter [...] All it comes down to is that I am a boy
coming home for a month and meeting someone who I haven’t seen for four months and people are afraid to merge (1985:9-10).

Because so much has been written about Less Than Zero it makes for a perfect starting point for my investigation into subjectivity and contemporary literature, yet this abundance of criticism means treading a well-worn path. Therefore, my aim is to expand on Nicki Sahlin’s existential reading and incorporate a brief psychoanalytic reading of my own, before investigating the matter of choice and freedom in relation to subjectivity. James Annesley has argued that Less Than Zero is a prime example of the postmodern text, with its MTV style, and its nihilistic theme of relentless accounts of drugs, drink, sex, abortion, prostitution, rape, sexual confusion and apathy. The Kirkus Reviews’ summation of Less Than Zero follows this line suggesting that: “first-novelist Ellis and narrator Clay register everything here with utter coolness: there is no inflection, no viewpoint; you’re supposed to simply sponge up all the horror. Unfortunately, however, the effect is one of overkill [...] you never experience revulsion, only eventual boredom” (Hall:1986:55). However, it is this lack of ‘revulsion’ and a relentless boredom among both the characters, and certain readers that makes the novel so effective and interesting.

Peter Freese questions the stylistic themes that support a view of the aimlessness of both character and plot in Ellis’ novel indicating that: “the atmosphere which pervades Less Than Zero is not that of the apocalypse, that is, [...] an end and a new beginning, but that of entropy with its irreversible movement towards final chaos and decay” (1990:121). He goes on to state that this entropy has left the characters with the: “speechlessness of an almost autistic generation living in a world in which true meaning has long been buried under the relentless onslaught of never-ceasing ‘information’” (121). However, I disagree with Freese regarding the level of entropy in Less Than Zero, and his notion of a: “gradual reduction in communicable information” (121) leading to an almost ‘autistic generation.’ Not only does this support the dominant
nihilistic perspective of contemporary youth, it ignores the possibility that this stylistic choice was made in order to satirise the very notion of the postmodern condition and resultant loss of individual self-expression in contemporary consumer society. All in all, Freese’s focus ignores the possibility that political and philosophical issues of subjectivity can be usefully articulated in contemporary literature and culture.

It is my belief that it is the overlooked issue of subjectivity that dominates *Less Than Zero*, wherein the lack of communication between characters reflects the issues of trust, honesty and a search for meaningful relationships and expressions of self in American society. There are certain repeated phrases that become themes, such as when Clay is told ‘people are afraid to merge on the freeways of L.A.’ that turns into the mantra that ‘people are afraid to merge’ full stop! Clay observes a billboard on Sunset Boulevard that simply says ‘Disappear Here’ which coupled with the repetition of ‘I wonder if he’s for sale’ become synonymous with his relationship with Julian who has strayed into a world of heroin addiction and prostitution. Clay has a poster of the cover of Elvis Costello’s album *Trust* on his wall that becomes symbolic of a deeper sense of fear and provides a link to his psychiatrist, who also has a Costello poster, and with whom Clay has difficulties communicating. Clay is fearful that he is loosing his sense of self in a setting which is replete with identical blond haired, blue eyed, tanned young men with the “same empty toneless voices” and that he is starting to “look exactly like them” (152). Each character has a dysfunctional relationship with their parents, most of whom are absent — either skiing in Alberta, or shopping in Japan — and any attempt at meaningful conversation quickly degenerates into mindless repetition and the avoidance of serious issues, as seen in the following excerpt between Clay and Kim:

‘What have you been doing?’ I ask.
‘What have you been doing?’ she asks back. I don’t say anything.
She looks up bewildered. ‘Come on Clay, tell me.’ She looks through the pile of clothes. ‘You must do something.’
‘Oh, I don’t know.’
‘What do you do?’ she asks.
‘Like what?’
‘I don’t know. Things.’ My voice breaks and for a moment I think about the coyote [which Blair ran over and Clay watched die] and I think I’m going to cry, but it passes and I just want to get out…
‘For instance?’
‘What’s your mom doing?’
‘Narrating a documentary about teenage spastics. What do you do Clay?’…
‘What else is your mom doing?’
‘She’s going to do this movie in Hawaii. What do you do?’
‘Have you spoken to her?’
‘Don’t ask me about my mother.’
‘Why not?’
‘Don’t say that.’…
‘Why not?’
‘What do you do?’ she asks …
‘What do you do?’
‘What do you do?’ she asks, her voice shaking. ‘Don’t ask me, please. Okay, Clay?’
‘Why not?’ …
‘Because I don’t know,’ she sighs.
I look at her and don’t feel anything and walk out … (148-9)

Not only do Clay and Kim avoid discussing anything meaningful, we begin to understand that Clay is deliberately avoiding revealing himself, for reasons I shall discuss next. Kim’s reluctance is plain, as we realise that her mother — in true philanthropic style — is kept so busy helping so-called ‘spastics’ that she is neglecting the needs of her own dysfunctional ‘teenage’ daughter. While this excerpt supports Freese’s proposition regarding the apathetic postmodern subject, I will now highlight the ways in which *Less Than Zero* explores subjectivity in a more optimistic manner.

4.3.c. Ellis and Elvis — Existentialism, Psychoanalysis and Punk Rock

Having outlined various divergent interpretations of *Less Than Zero*, I will now return briefly to Nicki Sahlin’s paper ‘But This Road Doesn’t Go Anywhere’ as a way of exploring the intertextual influences involved in Ellis’ investigation into subjectivity.

As already shown with Annesley’s Marxist reading of the novel as a critique of consumer society, and Sahlin’s existential perspective, Ellis’ novel is replete with possible readings that go beyond the nihilistic ‘MTV novel’ for the ‘slacker’ generation. However, I will now include another position, and argue that there is a possible mis-
reading by Sahlin of a key element of the novel that indicates an intertextual epiphany for Clay, and a turning point in the novel.

The importance of British proto-punk musician Elvis Costello to the narrative of *Less Than Zero* has been almost completely ignored in various critical reviews, the most obvious omission being that its title comes from Costello’s 1977 song of the same name. As a lyrical call to arms against the rise of the fascistic National Front in England — and the lack of remorse shown by ageing Nazi sympathiser Baronet Oswald Mosley when attempting to clear his name — this connection implicates the novel in an overtly political act and provides a link between Clay’s poster of Costello and that of his psychiatrist. In a novel full of meaningless conversations and avoidance of any interpersonal interaction, one particular passage in *Less Than Zero* stands out as a clear attempt by Clay to address his problems. On a number of occasions Clay meets with his nameless psychiatrist. during which the following conversation takes place:

I’m sitting in my psychiatrist’s office the next day, coming off from coke, sneezing blood. My psychiatrist’s wearing a red V-neck sweater with nothing on underneath and a pair of cut-off jeans. I start to cry really hard. He looks at me and fingers the gold necklace that hangs from his tan neck. I stop crying for a minute and he looks at me some more then writes something down on his pad. He asks me something. I tell him I don’t know what’s wrong; that maybe it has something to with my parents but not really or my friends or that I drive sometimes and I get lost; maybe its the drugs. ‘At least you realize these things. But that’s not what I’m talking about, that’s not really what I’m asking you, not really.’

He gets up and walks across the room and straightens a framed cover of a Rolling Stone with Elvis Costello on the cover and the words ‘Elvis Costello Repents’ in large white letters. I wait for him to ask me the question. ‘Like him? Did you see him at the Amphitheatre? Yeah? He’s in Europe now, I guess. At least that’s what I heard on MTV. Like the last album?’

‘What about me?’
‘What about you?’
‘What about me?’
‘You’ll be fine.’
‘I don’t know,’ I say. ‘I don’t think so.’
‘Let’s talk about something else.’
‘What about me?’ I scream choking.
‘Come on Clay,’ the psychiatrist says. ‘Don’t be so … mundane’ (122).

Like all authority figures in *Less Than Zero*, Clay’s psychiatrist pays little heed to this genuine expression of subjectivity. However, the outcome of this conversation can be
viewed as an epiphany, as Clay realises that he alone must deal with his issues, and finds him terminating his therapy by telling him to ‘fuck off’ over the phone. Furthermore, the casual nature of this relationship — coupled with Clay’s own experimental bisexuality — suggests that although he is entrusted to care for Clay he may also be interested in exploiting him sexually. This is implied when, following Clay’s outpouring of grief, he states: ‘that’s not what I’m really asking you, not really,’ and tells him to ‘stop being so mundane,’ suggesting that Clay’s problems may stem from sexual confusion, while at the same time encouraging this doubt.

Sahlin picks up on the questionable adult figures in *Less Than Zero* and also argues that parents and interim authority figures repeatedly exploit the needy rather than giving them requisite love and affection. In existential terms she suggests that: “When Clay finally admits that he has problems with his parents, his friends and drugs, the doctor’s response is to start a meaningless conversation about Elvis Costello […] The caretaker assigned to Clay’s emotional well-being is so indifferent that he considers Clay’s fears and anxiety boring and treats his survival instinct as a kind of absurdity. As with the indifference of the parents, the effect is negation of the self, the brief scene reinforcing the fact that Clay is totally alone in his quest for meaning” (1991:126). Although Sahlin’s the theme of absent or abusive figures of authority is an important one leading to a diminishing of the subject — as seen in the relationship between Julian and his drug dealing pimp — her casual dismissal of these references to Costello overlooks the fact that this apparent coincidence acts as a catalyst for Clay and his need to explore alternative expressions of subjectivity.

It is my proposition that there is a link between Clay’s quiet introspection beneath his poster of the cover of Costello’s album *Trust*, and his eventual emotional expression of subjectivity to his psychiatrist — he with whom we would believe he could (en)*Trust* his deepest secrets in return for a reasoned and professional response. Furthermore, the
framed cover of the issue of *Rolling Stone* in Clay’s psychiatrist’s office bearing the proclamation, ‘Elvis Costello Repents!’ has more importance than the purely semiotic, for it is the content of Greil Marcus’ article in that particular edition that pulls the various strands together. While on tour in America in 1979, Costello was knocked out by Bonnie Bramlett — a female member of The Stephen Stills Band — after he drunkenly referred to Ray Charles as a ‘blind, ignorant old nigger.’ This became a widely publicised event, and despite his anti-fascist song ‘Less Than Zero,’ his forthcoming production of the classic debut album by interracial 2-Tone band The Specials, and his involvement with the Rock Against Racism organisation, in America at least he was labelled a racist.²³ In a scene reminiscent of an unrepentant Oswald Mosley, Costello called a press conference to explain his actions. However, as he explained later to Marcus: “The press conference was unsuccessful because I was *fried* on that tour. This is aside from the incident; now I’m talking from a personal point of view […] I was, I think, rapidly becoming not a very nice person. I was losing track of what I was doing, why I was doing it, and my own control” (1993:232-3). Unfortunately this incident had a negative impact on his career in America and became a millstone around his neck. The failure of Mosley and Costello to clear their names also mirrors Clay’s inability to find internal solace when ‘repenting’ to his psychiatrist. The parallels between Clay and Costello become clearer when Costello ‘repents’ to Marcus three years later:

When we were playing, the frustration […] just ate me up. And with my lack of personal control of my life, and my supposed emotions, and drinking too much, and being on the road too much — I’m not saying that I wasn’t responsible for my actions; that sounds like I’m trying to excuse myself. *But I was not very responsible.* There’s a distinct difference. I was completely irresponsible, in fact. And far from carefree —careless with everything that I really care about. And I think that, inasmuch as it was said that we feed ourselves to the lions, you could say that whatever the incident was, it was symptomatic of the condition I was in, and that I deserved what happened regardless of the intentions of the remarks (233).
With the benefit of hindsight Costello realised his own failings and in an interview that very much resembles the interaction between analyst and analysand, he repents and accepts his own culpability for his actions and for the reaction of others. It could be argued that Costello, like Clay, has reached the very bottom, and that this event marked an epiphany whereby he became isolated, and alienated himself from his once adoring public, causing him to reassess his subjectivity and stop acting in ‘bad faith.’

Realising that he alone can effect any change in his life, Clay embarks on a journey of self-discovery that takes him into Julian’s sordid world and to the very bottom of his immediate existence. Having lent Julian a substantial sum of money, Clay discovers he is addicted to heroin and heavily in debt to his drug dealer Finn, who in turn is prostituting him by way of repayment. This downward spiral culminates when Clay — while trying to regain his money — is coerced by Finn into partaking in prostitution by acting as a voyeur while Julian has sex with a male client:

[I]n the elevator on the way down to Julian’s car, I say, ‘Why didn’t you tell me the money was for this?’ and Julian, his eyes all glassy, sad grin on his face, says, ‘Who cares? Do you? Do you really care?’ and I don’t say anything and realize that I don’t care and suddenly feel foolish, stupid. I also realize that I’ll go with Julian to the Saint Marquis. That I want to see if things like this can actually happen. And as the elevator descends, passing the second floor, and the first floor, going even farther down, I realize that the money doesn’t matter. That all that does is that I want to see the worst (1985:172).

The lift’s descent represents Clay’s own journey into the seedy life of drug addiction and prostitution, and to reach the very bottom just as Costello did. It is possible to argue that given his own sexual confusion, drug use, and once close affiliation with Julian, that Clay’s desire to witness this act of degradation could be seen as an example of experience by proxy. Clay realises that his own position is not that far from Julian’s, and what happens in Room 101 of the Saint Marquis Hotel — with its obvious Orwellian and Sadean connotations, and as close to ‘Less Than Zero’ as you can get — suggests a sense of self preservation and a need to escape from an increasingly meaningless existence.
4.3.d. Catharsis and Redemption: The Case for Choice

Having explored how *Less Than Zero* can be read as a text that repudiates the common conception of the aimless, apolitical and nihilistic nature of contemporary subjectivity and literature, I will now conclude my discussion of Ellis’ novel with the optimistic theme of redemption. In his article ‘Zombies,’ published in *Time* magazine in 1985, Paul Gray paints a very pessimistic view of the novel, and focuses on its apparent stylistic shortcomings and the lack of character substance, stating that:

Ellis conveys the hellishness of aimless lives with economy and skill: his efforts to distance Clay, the narrator, from all the other zombies is unsuccessful. True, he has a few scruples. He does not mainline heroin, he walks out before the end of an apparently genuine snuff film, and he refuses an obliging friend’s invitation to rape a drugged and trussed up twelve-year-old girl. He is also sensitive. The crying jag he experiences at his psychiatrist’s office may suggest some inner anguish, although it might just as easily occur because he spends so much time drugged to the eyeballs. Ultimately Ellis’ novel is anchored to a hero who stands for nothing. How Clay managed to muster the energy to go to college in the first place remains mysterious: So too do the forces that made him so passive and world-weary at age 18. That such questions about the central character seem unimportant is a tribute to Ellis’ talent; his refusal to address them is thus all the more unsettling. In spite of its surface vitality and macabre glitter, *Less Than Zero* offers little more than its title promises (1986:57-58).

As already seen, Grey’s derision of Clay’s scruples and his dismissal of his attempt to convey his fears to his psychiatrist have been proven false, and run counter to my own. That Clay makes the choice not to partake in heroin use, rape an underage girl and view a snuff movie does in fact set him apart from his peers and indicate the only expressions of moralistic choice throughout the novel, and the idea that he stands for nothing is also problematic given his innate sense of self-preservation. Furthermore, in a novel full of meaningless communication and fear of trust, Ellis’ narrative choice to leave so many questions unanswered not only fits well with the stylistics of the novel but also with the character depiction. Any outpouring of internal insight — other than those already discussed — that answer the questions posed by Grey, would necessarily undermine the impact of this intense feeling of hopelessness.
James Annesley also expresses this perspective of contemporary American fiction as lacking in catharsis or transcendence of character, arguing that: “The gloomy tones that colour Clay’s portrait of Los Angeles at the end of Less Than Zero are typical of the kind of apocalyptic elements that pattern blank fiction [...] there is no relief, no real revaluation or redemption, only a profoundly depressing sense of impending destruction” (1998:108). The case against Annesley’s position is one that repudiates the continuation of a metaphysical notion of a transcendent and self-present subject, and having already determined that such a view is problematic with my own theoretical proposition of the diminished subject, it follows that any thought of redemption and catharsis in Less Than Zero would need to be influenced by these considerations.

Having reached an epiphany following his disastrous meeting with his psychiatrist, Clay begins to take control of his life and attempts to stop acting in ‘bad faith.’ The idea that the characters in Less Than Zero are denying the condition of the possibility of change in the formation of their subjectivity, and are complicit with the meaninglessness of existence, is a repeated theme clearly expressed in the following excerpt when Julian confronts Finn and attempts to escape his self-destructive situation:

‘Don’t you appreciate what I’ve done for you?’ Finn pushes Julian harder against the door. ‘Huh? Don’t you?’
‘Stop it, you asshole pimp.’
‘Don’t you? Answer me. Don’t you?’
‘Done for me? You’ve turned me into a whore.’ Julian’s face is all red and his eyes are wet and I’m freaking out, just trying to stare at the floor whenever Julian or Finn looks over at me.
‘No, I haven’t done that, man,’ Finn says quietly.
‘What?’
‘I didn’t turn you into a whore. You did it yourself’ (1985:182).

The extent that Julian has slipped into nothingness is driven home when Finn coerces him into injecting yet more heroin, and rather than standing up to him and accepting his own complicity in the situation, Julian resigns himself to his fate and acts in ‘bad faith.’ Clay can only look on having reached his epiphany, realising that Julian’s only hope is to face the ‘terror of his freedom’ and make the choice to escape his current situation.
The increasing distance between the two indicates Clay’s desire to escape and culminates with a complete loss of respect as he watches an older man sodomise him.

It is at this point that Clay reaches a catharsis as the various themes of the novel finally come together: “Disappear Here. The Syringe fills with blood. You’re a beautiful boy, that’s all that matters. Wonder if he’s for sale. People are afraid to merge. To merge” (183). Following his first hand observation of Julian’s decline and his subsequent break-up with his girlfriend, Clay decides to leave L.A. and return to college, indicating the need to make a new start. With a view to Clay’s choice of freedom over nihilism Sahlin states that:

By making Clay’s final choice survival rather than oblivion, Ellis offers redemption in a nearly hopeless situation. For some readers, the circumstances surrounding Clay’s confrontation with the void may strike a dismaying minor note in terms of existential possibilities, but given the nihilistic alternatives, Less Than Zero holds its own. Ellis has created a character who is in realistic terms no hero but who has nevertheless grappled with a fundamental question. Clay has become aware of his own anxiety and alienation, as well as the meaninglessness around him; and though he has found no solution, he has found the courage to continue to live. In having faced the absurd as he finds it, Clay takes on the proportions of an existential hero (1991:132).

While Clay makes the ‘choice’ to return to College the outcome remains unknown, for having recognised that his situation in L.A. is ultimately futile and potentially fatal, he realises he is unable to find a space within his social milieu that doesn’t constitute an instance of ‘bad faith.’ He has chosen to face the terror of freedom and leave L.A. and although this may prove to be equally unsatisfactory, it shows he has the courage to embrace the condition of the possibility of change. As such, Clay can be seen as an instance of a diminished subject who has made the choice for self-preservation. However, while still being constrained by the dominant cultural discourses, he faces yet another aporia in having to find a fulfilling alternative expression of subjectivity within those ultimately limiting discursive formations.

4.4.a. In Summation — Chapter 4
By integrating my perspective of the a priori diminished subject into the recent theoretical arena, it becomes apparent that the predominance of postmodernism as the current mode of cultural production is problematic in the extreme. Furthermore, the perspective of a fragmented and schizophrenic contemporary subject suffering from a temporally specific crisis — as a result of a loss of the metaphysics of presence — can be viewed as the a priori eternal recurrence of the recognition of the terror of the meaningfulness of existence, that finds the capitalist mode of production fulfilling an inherent need for metaphysical comfort — filling the void left with the demise of the traditional ‘grand’ narratives — and has much in common with existential nihilism. Interestingly, within the many negative critical discussions of postmodernism, we see a surprising lack of engagement with the anti-metaphysical pursuits of the great many theorists who have undoubtedly influenced the postmodern debate, despite the deterministic appropriation of many of their key themes and concepts. Furthermore, that this tradition is ignored by many contemporary theorists is apparent when we observe ad nauseam those attempts to deterministically define postmodernism — and in turn legitimate another arbitrary discursive formation — and an economy of critical appraisal which calls for the return of the certitude of self-presence in a form theoretical retrogression that beggars belief. More worrying are the vitriolic neo-conservative attacks that deride certain contemporary cultural productions for being nihilistic, amoral and valueless. Thus, in one fell swoop, we find dismissed those texts which attempt to draw attention to the eternal recurrence of the crisis of subjectivity through the defamiliarisation of restrictive everyday discourses, and the positive possibilities of extreme explorations of certain fictionalised accounts of the a priori condition of the possibility of change.

Notes:

Early twentieth century, so postmodernism is the expression on an aesthetic and textual level of the century capitalism, and modernism was the expression of that. Just as realism was an embodiment in terms of literary form, of nineteenth century political-economic society, I believe also that its formal features in many ways express the deeper logic of this particular social system. It was international, yet different in different continents and different cities. It was always more than a cultural phenomenon; it always involved philosophical, sociological and economic contexts and arguments as well. Like any aesthetic, its political implications and associations varied enormously, from, at various times and places, the nihilist, the socialist, to the conservative, even the fascist! (1994:xviii).

In his text Postmodernist Fiction Brian McHale indicates his frustration with the term embracing: “Postmodernist? The term doesn’t even make sense. For if ‘modern’ means pertaining to the ‘present,’ then ‘post-modern’ can only mean ‘pertaining to the future,’ and in that case what could postmodernist fiction be except fiction that has not yet been written? Either the term is a solecism, or this ‘post’ does not mean what the dictionary tells us it ought to mean, but only functions as an intensifier. ‘In a world which values progress,’ says John Gardner, ‘post-modern in fact means New! Improved!’ and Christine Brooke-Rose says that ‘it merely means moderner modern (most-modernism?)’” (1989:4).

In his text Fredric Jameson, Adam Roberts indicates the conflict between Jameson and Lyotard explaining that: “what postmodernism represents is the breaking down of these ‘master narratives.’ It is no longer possible to believe in a grand story that explains everything. From the various relativisms and uncertainties of scientific discourse, Lyotard extrapolates out into a general indeterminacy, a suspicion of metanarratives. This is a position close to the attitudes of deconstructionists, of course, and is clearly opposed to Jameson’s position. For Jameson […] literature and culture only made sense if placed in the context of a grand narrative — Marxism. But Lyotard reserved a special hostility for Marxism, which he identified squarely with the practical Communism he despised as an agent of massive human misery. There is a certain gleefulness in which he tolls the death knell of one of the most potent of ‘master narratives’” (2000:116). At least the spectre of dubious philosophical practices has been laid to rest! Bill Readings explains Lyotard’s optimistic view of the ‘paralogic’ nature of postmodernism stating that: “This is what Lyotard refers to in The Postmodern Condition as the ‘horizon of dissensus,’ in which consensus is never reached but always displaced by a new paralogical narrative, which does not aim at explaining that: "what postmodernism represents is the breaking down of these ‘master narratives.’ It is no longer possible to believe in a grand story that explains everything. From the various relativisms and uncertainties of scientific discourse, Lyotard extrapolates out into a general indeterminacy, a suspicion of metanarratives. This is a position close to the attitudes of deconstructionists, of course, and is clearly opposed to Jameson’s position. For Jameson […] literature and culture only made sense if placed in the context of a grand narrative — Marxism. But Lyotard reserved a special hostility for Marxism, which he identified squarely with the practical Communism he despised as an agent of massive human misery. There is a certain gleefulness in which he tolls the death knell of one of the most potent of ‘master narratives’” (1991:69).

Jameson argues this point in ‘Postmodernism and Consumer Society:’ “I believe that the emergence of postmodernism is closely related to the emergence of this new moment of late consumer or multinational capitalism. I believe also that its formal features in many ways express the deeper logic of this particular social system. I will only be able, however, to show this for one major theme: namely the disappearance of a sense of history, the way in which our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in perpetual change that obliterates traditions of the kind which all earlier social information have had, in one way or another, to preserve” (1998:20).

He explains this when arguing that: “I want here to sketch a few of the ways in which the new postmodernism expresses the inner truth of that newly emergent social order of late capitalism, but will have to limit the description to only two of its significant features, which I will call pastiche and schizophrenia” (1998:3).

Adam Roberts indicates that Jameson’s political position is a Marxist one, which not only colours his theoretical position regarding postmodernism, but also his outrage towards French theorists, such as Derrida and Lyotard, who argue in favour of the death of ‘grand’ narratives. He explains that: “the first thing to note is the way in which Jameson’s approach to the postmodern condition has always been thoroughly Marxist. Where previous theorists had looked at postmodern poetry, or art, or architecture, as a style or series of styles, Jameson was the first to link it directly to socio-political circumstances — to history, in other words. Just as realism was an embodiment in terms of literary form, of nineteenth century capitalism, and modernism was the expression of the reified, post-industrial capitalism of the early twentieth century, so postmodernism is the expression on an aesthetic and textual level of the dynamic of ‘late capitalism’” (2000:112).
Front and enjoyed political success during the race riot torn UK of the late 1970s.

21 & 204) and can be found in Ellis’ addresses” (1990:72). Ouch!

19 The term ‘disappear here’ is repeated on at least six occasions in Less Than Zero (pp: 41, 66, 176, 183 & 204) and can be found in Ellis’ The Rules of Attraction and Glamorama (416).

21 Elvis Costello’s fifth album Trust was released in 1981.

22 Oswald Moseley created the British Union of Fascists in the thirties that evolved into the National Front and enjoyed political success during the race riot torn UK of the late 1970s.
This is extremely ironic given that Costello’s involvement with The Specials continued and led to his production of their 1984 hit single, and political call to arms, ‘Nelson Mandela,’ a song which was arguably instrumental in bringing about a greater awareness of the plight of the then incarcerated Mandela, and resulted in a greater pressure being applied to the Apartheid regime.

Although not an instrumental character in Ellis’ second novel *The Rules of Attraction*, Clay does reappear briefly, and from this we are given the impression that little has actually changed when he states that: “People are afraid to merge on campus after midnight [a question of a rapist]” and in his last moment in the novel that: “I miss the beach” (1987:184), after singing a line from *California Dreaming*, indicating that despite everything Clay thinks he would be ‘safe and warm’ if he was in L.A.
Chapter 5

The Prescient Text: Subjectivity, Literature and Philosophy in
Trainspotting, Empire of the Senseless, Cocaine Nights
and American Psycho

5.1.a. Introduction

Given that certain criticisms that view contemporary fiction as meaningless, nihilistic and postmodern have been proven inherently problematic, the aim of this chapter is to continue to refute these claims through a close reading of four texts that clearly counter this negative perspective. What follows then is a discussion of the divergent critical responses to Irvine Welsh’s Trainspotting, Kathy Acker’s Empire of the Senseless, J.G. Ballard’s Cocaine Nights and Bret Easton Ellis’ American Psycho. By relating my readings to the author’s wider oeuvre, I shall argue that these novels problematise the age-old division between literature and philosophy, carry out important and immediately recognisable investigations into contemporary subjectivity, and indicate an acceptance of the aporia of the meaninglessness of existence, while postulating a future for the a priori diminished subject free from nihilism and the supposed ‘postmodern condition.’ That is, through the exploration of extreme and transgressive aspects of subjectivity — those that confront the reader by defamiliarising the seemingly a priori role of the subject in society — these texts can be read as fictional articulations of the inherent lack of the metaphysics of self-presence and — for better or worse, and depending on the text — the condition of the possibility of change.

5.2.a. Trainspotting — Irvine Welsh, Psychoanalysis, Self-Presence and Heroin

Irvine Welsh’s debut novel Trainspotting quickly transcended its initial underground success, becoming a hugely popular bestseller that controversially explored alternative expressions of counter-discursive subjectivity, and an awareness of the a priori meaninglessness of existence, on many levels. However, this extreme story of heroin
addiction, AIDS and overdose resulted in a swift critical backlash. In *Gangland* Mark Davis indicates the moral indignation *Trainspotting* evoked when discussing Mandy Sayer’s review entitled ‘A Blistering Ride Underground,’ wherein we find her blustering: “I can’t help thinking […] of dirty realism and deconstruction as two parallel tracks taking us on a hurtling train ride into nothingness [sure, we’re all travelling in the same direction, but I think I’d rather walk” (1999:131). Davis responds by pointing out that: “Sayer not only managed to ignore the chord the mega-selling *Trainspotting* struck among many young readers, but in a single sentence pandered to both of the literary establishment’s currently fashionable prejudices, lambasting both ‘dirty realism’ and deconstruction” (131) — and once again we see deconstruction blamed for culture’s apparent ‘ride into nothingness.’ Although *Trainspotting* was attacked for romanticising drug use, glamorising heroin chic, and over the validity of Welsh’s description of heroin addiction,¹ such literalist readings not only failed to see past the subject matter, they ignored the possibility of political and philosophical content.

Structurally *Trainspotting* consist of a number of temporally disparate and loosely connected vignettes, and despite having very few characters, this anti-teleological narrative ultimately focuses on Mark Renton. For Renton, heroin use is a determinedly philosophical decision to adopt a counter-discursive practice in order to retreat from a society that makes him an outsider, and threatens his attempts to simplify his existence through the selfish pleasure of drug use. It can be argued that he is attempting to achieve an ideal form of subjectivity approximating pure self-presence but — as he repeatedly discovers — the condition of the possibility of change, and his dependency on the Other, encroach on his introspection. This dichotomy is highlighted when Renton states that: “Ah love nothing (except junk), ah hate nothing (except forces that prevent me getting any) and ah fear nothing (except not scoring)” (1993:2). Although, it may be true that he has simplified his life, this extreme choice between contemporary culture
and heroin addiction could, in turn, be read as the choice between life and death. Furthermore, this counter-discursive decision can also be seen as a micro-level reflection of the very thing he wishes to avoid, for Renton remains a consumer — albeit of illicit substances — and reaches an *aporia* whereby he finds himself still constrained by the hegemonic discourses he wishes to escape.

Like all works of fiction *Trainspotting* can be read in a variety of different ways, as the controversy surrounding it attests to. In a chapter entitled ‘Searching for the Inner Man’ Renton is forced to see psychiatrist Tom Forbes, in a judicially enforced attempt at drug rehabilitation. However, he has his own insights into psychoanalysis, and views the whole practice with humorous disdain:

> Ah did learn a few things though, based oan Forbes’s disclosures and ma ain researches into psychoanalysis and how ma behaviour should be interpreted. Ah have an unresolved relationship wi ma deid brother, Davie, as ah been unable tae work oot or express ma feelings about his catatonic life and subsequent death. Ah have oedipal feelings towards ma mother and an attendant unresolved jealousy towards ma father. Ma junk behaviour is anal in concept, attention-seeking, yes, but instead of withholding the faeces tae rebel against parental authority, ah’m pittin smack intae ma body tae claim power over it vis-a-vis society in general. Radge, eh? (185).

It could be argued that Welsh’s fictional rejection of psychoanalysis is a response to its efforts to sublimate counter-discursive expressions of subjectivity into supposed normal society, for as Renton points out: “Rehabilitation means the surrender ay the self” (181). The derision Renton feels towards Forbes could therefore be read as his attempt to resist yet another attempt by society to deny him his simple life and reintegrate him into socially acceptable behaviour. Needless to say this effort fails, and Renton quickly resumes his habit although, like the impediments to his supply of heroin and resultant problems with the law, Renton’s attempts at counter-discursive subjectivity are always problematised due to his necessary interaction with both the Other and those inescapable hegemonic discourses. Furthermore, it is also possible to see Renton’s choice of heroin as an instance of ‘bad faith’ when, despite his mistrust of Forbes, he states that: “Tom seemed tae get us closer tae what ah believe the truth might be. Ah
5.1.b. ‘Choose Life’ — The end of the downward spiral

The existential themes of bad faith, freedom and choice are replete throughout *Trainspotting* which is unsurprising given that Renton is portrayed as a well-read autodidact who briefly attended university and, despite his counter-discursive lifestyle choice, has a genuine *penchant* for philosophy. This interest becomes apparent in the exchange between Renton and his magistrate when he faces court following his arrest for stealing philosophical books:

— You stole the books from Waterstone’s bookshop, with the intention of selling them, he states. Sell fuckin books. My fuckin erse.
— No, ah sais …
— Mr Renton, you did not intend to sell the books?
— Naw. Eh, no, your honour. They were for reading.
— So you read Kierkegaard. Tell us about him, Mr. Renton, The patronising cunt sais.
— I’m interested in his concepts of subjectivity and truth, and particularly his ideas concerning choice; the notion that genuine choice is made out of doubt and uncertainty, and without recourse to the experience or advice of others. It could be argued, with some justification, that it’s primarily a bourgeois existential philosophy and would therefore seek to undermine collective societal wisdom. However, it’s also a liberating philosophy, because when societal wisdom is negated, the basis for social control over the individual becomes weakened and … but I’m rabbiting a bit here (166).

Renton’s obvious familiarity with the works of Søren Kierkegaard, coupled with his choice not to conform to ‘collective societal wisdom’ can be read as a deliberate attempt to gain greater control over his own subjectivity in existential terms. However, the freedom gained from heroin use is problematic given the exigencies of this choice, such as the problems in obtaining heroin, the danger of overdose, and the repeated attempts by hegemonic practices to control this illegal and counter-discursive activity. Renton can clearly see the absurdity of society and the meaninglessness of his life, yet his
choice is ultimately self-defeating, for as the title of the book suggests, heroin addiction, like ‘trainspotting’ — grown men watching locomotives and noting their identification numbers — is effectively a pointless exercise.²

The inability of Renton to maintain a counter-discursive expression of self-present subjectivity becomes apparent as outside influences impinge and ‘change’ the direction of his quest. Examples of the condition of the possibility of change can be seen when Renton overdoses, when ‘baby Dawn’ dies from cot death, and, most importantly, when Tommy — his once ‘clean’ friend who he introduces to heroin — dies from AIDS related illness. Within Renton there comes a greater awareness of the failure of heroin to deliver his ideal self-present freedom, thus faced with a choice between the unreliable and dangerous nature of his addiction, and the restrictions of dominant cultural discourses, he realises that he alone must decide what choice to make:

Society invents spurious convoluted logic tae absorb and change people whae’s behaviour is outside its mainstream. Suppose that ah knew the pros and cons, know that ah’m gaunnae hav a short life, am ay sound mind, etcetera, etcetera, but still want tae use smack? They won’t let ya dae it. They won’t let ye dae it, because it’s seen as a sign of thir ain failure. The fact is ye jist simply choose tae reject whit they huv tae offer. Choose us. Choose life. Choose mortgage payments; choose washing machines; choose cars; choose sitting on a couch watching mind-numbing and spirit-crushing game shows, stuffing fuckin junk food intae yir mooth. Choose rotting away, pissing and shiteing yersel in a home, a total fuckin embarrassment tae the selfish, fucked-up brats ye’ve produced. Choose life. Well, ah choose no tae choose life. If the cunts can’t handle that, it’s thair fuckin problem (187-9).

Thus, Renton has reached the bottom and can see no satisfactory options, but similarly he has become aware of his complicity in this situation. He made the choice not to choose the life offered by mainstream cultural discourses, but that choice has proven to be as meaningless as that which he rejected, forcing Renton to choose between survival and oblivion. Yet he is afraid to make the move, terrified by the choice of freedom and caught up in unhealthy friendships with the likes of the self-centred Sick Boy, the ineffectual Spud and the psychotic Begbie. Renton, therefore, not only needs to escape
his cycle of heroin use but also the limitations of his so-called friends and social *milieu*, so he makes the choice to ‘choose life,’ and not to choose Leith!

The chance to make this break comes unexpectedly when the ‘friends’ inadvertently come into possession of a large quantity of heroin, which they take to London and sell for a substantial sum of money. However, during their celebrations Francis Begbie — also know as ‘General Franco’ because of his fascistic tendencies — carries out one of his routinely violent episodes and humiliates Renton — who routinely avoids violence — by disparagingly refers to him as Rent Boy[^3] in front of the others. Following this event, Renton makes the choice to steal the proceeds of the drug deal, realising that this choice is less terrifying than his hazardous friendship with Begbie:

Ironically it was Begbie who was the key. Ripping off your mates was the highest offence in his book, and he would demand the severest penalty. Renton had used Begbie, used him to burn his boats completely and utterly. It was Begbie who ensured he could never return. He had done what he had wanted to do. He could now never go back to Leith, to Edinburgh, even to Scotland, ever again. There, he could not be anything other than he was. Now free from them all, for good, he could be what he wanted to be. He’d stand or fall alone. This thought both terrified and excited him as he contemplated life in Amsterdam (344).

Thus, Renton has made a complete break from his meaningless life and dubious friends. Standing alone, he is free to choose his own destiny and although the outcomes of this choice are unknown he has at least faced up to the terror of freedom and acted in ‘good faith.’ Therefore, Renton can be seen as existential explorer of subjectivity, and there are no guarantees in this novel, no happy endings, and no transcendence of the characters into holistic self-present subjects. Instead, Renton can be viewed as a fictional representation of the proposition of the diminished subject aware of the inherent *aporia* of existence when faced with his ineluctable complicity with dominant cultural discourses. Thus, Renton is unable to find an expression of subjectivity that is independent of these discursive practices, yet despite this he chooses to make a change, leading me to argue that despite certain negative receptions, *Trainspotting* can be read as optimistic exploration of subjectivity and the condition of the possibility of change.
5.2.a. Empire of the Senseless — Kathy Acker and the Failure of Theory

The ceiling of languages is falling down. Either add to this rubble or shove at least some of it away. Liberty, shit. The liberty to starve. The liberty to speak words to which no one listens. The liberty to get diseases no doctor treats or can cure. The liberty to live in conditions cockroaches wouldn’t touch except to die in. The liberty to be an eighty-three-year-old Ukrainian shuffling in her slippers among the cat shit in the slum building hallways — ‘Is the landlord here? Is there light anywhere?’ — Kathy Acker, in The Empire of the Senseless (1987:163-4).

A considerable amount has been written about Kathy Acker’s _oeuvre_, much of which has centred on the influence of queer theory on her attacks of ‘phallogocentric’ society, and her exploration of alternative modes of expression for women beyond those of dominant and oppressive discourses. Yet despite the predominance of discussions of her impact as a feminist writer, I will instead focus on the manner in which she combines theory and fiction in _Empire of the Senseless_, and her view of the deconstruction of subjectivity as a positive political act which brings together a view of the diminished subject and the philosophical possibilities of literature.

_Empire of the Senseless_ is a strangely disjointed novel that alternates between the perspectives of the characters Thivai and Abhor, and a variety of fantasies that find them living as pirates, and caught up in a future Algerian revolution in Paris. Moments of prose mingled with vulgar obscenities and literary theory make this difficult book a rewarding read, and finds Acker carrying out a deconstruction of language as the dominant tool of oppressive hegemonic discourses such as psychology — by exploring dysfunctional familial situations and confusing gender roles — with an overall theme of literature as a counter-discursive tool. The extent of Acker’s interest in the relationship between language and subjectivity can be seen a section entitled ‘Demolition’ wherein the following questions are posed: “What is language? Does anyone speak to anyone? Is language computer language, journalese, diction of expectation and behaviour, announcement of the allowed possibilities of reality? Does language control like money?” (164). Quite clearly, it is the defamiliarisation of language that is fundamental
to Acker’s work, for not only is she aware of the inherent relationship between subject and language, she views cultural practices as ineluctably bound by language and discursively oppressive, diminishing the subject in much the same way a Marxist would view the capitalist mode of production.

Acker’s theoretical approach to the question of language has an obvious lineage that clearly highlights the influence of Freud, Lacan, Kristeva, Cixous and Derrida to name but a few. Referring to Acker in an article entitled ‘Punko Panza,’ in the *New Republic* journal, David Van Leer states that:

> It is easy to understand the intellectual and political point that Acker would make, and to recognize its source in the philosophical scepticism of French post-structuralism, especially deconstruction. Post-structuralism began the business of dismantling the concepts of ‘history,’ ‘nature,’ ‘self;’ deconstruction continued the job by showing language — even the language of people who want to criticize social arrangements — to be itself simply the product of and reinforcer of existing power relations (1987:40).

With this in mind, it can be seen that Acker is not merely interested in the relationship between the subject and language, but also the difficulties in engaging in counter-discursive practices within dominant cultural formations. This realisation is based on the appropriation of deconstructive practices, that propose that any act of resistance is always implicated in reinforcing, and legitimating, that which it seeks to undermine due to an ineluctable linguistic relationship with those discourses.

Therefore, Acker is patently aware that her literary responses to dominant discursive practices — and the way in which language oppresses and limits expressions of subjectivity — are implicitly involved in perpetuating all that she ‘abhors,’ thus rendering them senseless activities. This *aporia* becomes clear when Abhor states that: “The demand for an adequate mode of expression is senseless. Then why is there this searching for an adequate mode of expression? Was I searching for a social and political paradise? Since all acts, including expressive acts, are inter-dependent, paradise cannot be an absolute. Theory doesn’t work” (113). Acker not only carries out a literary
deconstruction of subjectivity, she also deconstructs her own position, as is explained by R.H.W. Dillard in his New York Times review of *Empire of the Senseless*, entitled ‘Lesson No.1: Eat Your Mind:’

One way to look at the novels of Kathy Acker in general and this one in particular is to see them all as the log of her almost desperate search for an ‘adequate mode of expression’ for a time and a world whose centre will not only not hold, but hasn’t been able to hold her so long that the very idea of a centre seems absurd. Even as she denies the legitimacy of the struggle, she wrestles in her work as directly as any writer has ever done with the actual language of literature. Distrusting it almost completely, but nevertheless completely dependent on it, she attacks it, twists it, deconstructs it and distorts the cultural values implicit in its structures, seeking always to make a literature ‘which denounces and slashes apart the repressing machine at the level of the signified’ (1999:10).

Clearly despite the fact that Acker uses literature to deconstruct discursive cultural practices and search for new forms of expression, she is also aware of the ‘senseless’ nature of this act. So when Abhor, asks, ‘why is there this search for an adequate mode of expression?’ and points out that ‘[t]heory doesn’t work,’ Acker creates an *aporia* which discounts both literature and theory as valid ways of exploring alternative subjectivity. What she is faced with then, is the choice to find ‘modes of expression’ within existing cultural and theoretical formations, or to embrace the apolitical and meaningless nature of the only truly original expressions of self, such as nonsense, gibberish and schizophrenia.⁵

The constraints of language, and the inherent diminished nature of subjectivity — given the limitations of a culture dominated by discursive practices — coupled with the *aporia* of an ineluctable contrition with these oppressive discourses, and problems associated with the meaningless nature of (non)sense, is made clear by Acker in the following excerpt:

That part of our being (mentality, feeling, physicality) which is free of all control let’s call our ‘unconscious.’ Since it’s free of control, it’s our only defence against institutionalized meaning, institutionalized language, control, fixation, judgement, prison. Ten years ago it seemed possible to destroy language through language: to destroy language which normalizes and controls by cutting that language. Nonsense would attack the empire-making (empirical) empire of language, the prisons of meaning. But this is nonsense, since it depended on sense, simply pointed back to the
normalizing institutions. What is the language of the ‘unconscious’? (If this ideal unconscious or freedom doesn’t exist: pretend it does, use fiction, for the sake of survival, all our survival). Its primary language must be taboo, all that is forbidden. Thus, an attack on the institutions of prison via language would demand the use of language or languages which aren’t acceptable, which are forbidden. Language, on one level, constitutes a set of codes and social and historical agreements. Nonsense doesn’t per se break down the codes; speaking precisely that which the codes forbid breaks the codes (1988:133-34).

For Acker then, the only forms of expression that have any political impact are those necessarily implicated with the ‘prison of meaning’ and are therefore marginalised. As such, she focuses on suppressed expressions of subjectivity which exist in the margins of society and — more often than not — leads to those exhibiting them being subsumed by even more extreme and totalising discourses — such as psychiatric institutions and prisons. Thus, the closest we can get to alternative and adequate modes of expression is through those texts deemed taboo or too extreme to be accepted by mainstream society.

Extreme expressions of subjectivity abound in Empire of the Senseless and, as in all her work Acker uses all aspects of language, narrative structure and content to explore the counter-discursive in contemporary society. Her use of parody and pastiche — as seen with her feminist interpretation of Don Quixote and her rewriting of Great Expectations — undermine the traditional notion of the novel as an original artistic act, reflecting her own perspective of the impossibility of original and adequate forms of expression for the subject. This position is supported by Naomi Jacobs in her paper, ‘Kathy Acker and the Plagiarized Self,’ wherein she states that: “Through semantic and stylistic crudeness, pastiche-appropriations of famous literary texts, and outrageous manipulations of historical and literary figures, Acker attempts simultaneously to deconstruct the tyrannical structures of official culture and to plagiarize an identity, constructing a self from salvaged fragments of those very structures she has dismantled” (1999:21). Thus, Acker’s work becomes the embodiment of the post-structuralist text representing the discursive subject, which rather than exhibiting comforting self-
presence and transcendence, closely resembles a narrative function that is being constantly written, bringing subjectivity yet closer to language and literature.

Rather than viewing both literature and subjectivity as original modes of expression, Acker instead sees them as palimpsests to be written upon over and over again. As such, pastiche and tattooing become major themes in *Empire of the Senseless* whereby pastiche represents the inherent intertextual and the non-determining function of meaning in all aspects of writing, and the tattoo acts as a metaphor for the narrative and textual elements of subjectivity. The importance of the taboo in Acker’s work is explained by Ellen G. Friedman in her article “‘Now Eat Your Mind’: An Introduction to the Works of Kathy Acker,” wherein she points out that:

The tattoo, in fact, is the central image in [...] *Empire of the Senseless*, a work dedicated to her tattooist. A precise metaphor for her writing, the tattoo is an outlawed, magical language written directly onto the body, becoming part of the body, the body turning into text, an audacious rendering of Cixous’s writing the body [...] Acker, obsessively explores the territory of the taboo, claims it as the proper domain from which to launch attacks on Western culture — an empire of the senseless. In *Empire of the Senseless*, she systematically summons up every taboo she can think of — including incest, rape, terrorism, vomit, shit, menstruation, homosexuality, a very long list (1999:20).

As such, with the realisation of the inherently discursive nature of subjectivity, those counter-discursive and taboo practices deemed unacceptable by wider society can be read as attempts to establish modes of expression that — although still existing within mainstream culture — are not tolerated and are repeatedly marginalised. Therefore, Acker’s investigations into taboo subjectivity can be read as a form of deconstruction that defamiliarises and problematises dominant cultural discourses by focussing on their ‘Other.’ That such counter-discursive activities can be read as the expression of a desire for greater individuality is made clear by Acker when explaining that: “A black boy cut his right arm with a razor blade: ‘Since I’m now making blood come out of my own arm, I can’t be nothing.’ The boy stared at his flowing blood” (1987:71). Thus, the
desire for control over the subject of language in the face of meaningless, oppressive and senseless cultural discourses becomes manifest as self-mutilation.7

This desire for greater control does not mean that Acker is calling for an ideal self-present subject, rather she is expressing a belief in the possibility of change through counter-discursive and taboo articulations of being. If culture is inherently textual in nature, then Acker’s own notion of the tattoo, and the ‘black boy’s’ desire to carve himself a new form of subjectivity, can be seen as literal attempts to rewrite the narrative of self. As such, supposedly anti-social activities, such as self-harm, drug abuse and tattooing, can be viewed in an optimistic light, for as Abhor points out: “I’m playing with only my blood and shit and death because mommy ordered me to be only what she desired, that is, to be not possible, but it isn’t possible to be and not to be possible. By playing with blood and shit and death, I’m controlling my life” (51). Therefore, the taboo — those acts viewed as self-destructive and nihilistic — is put into sharp relief by Acker, who states that: “Masochism is only political rebellion” (58), and views the taboo act as the ultimate expression of valid alternative modes of subjectivity, which are in themselves overtly political acts.

Therefore for Acker, despite the failure of contemporary society to live up to its promise, and the oppression of more adequate modes of expression by the repressive discursive practices of language, there is still hope for the contemporary subject. That place is in the extreme expressions of subjectivity as seen in the taboo activities of various counter-cultures — its own ‘heart of darkness’ — and in the fictional representations of being in her novels. Friedman explains this perspective arguing that:

Acker deconstructs social grammar, syntax, and modes of meaning. She perceives Americans as having become so thoroughly roboticized by their institutions that hope for love, for authentic life and identity, can only be reimagined in some other space, outside of society, outside the law. Acker writes, ‘I’m trying to destroy all laws, tell you not to follow laws, restrictions.’ Pirates, murderers, Arabs, terrorists, slave traders and other Acker permutations of the extreme (sometimes a fantasy) outsider for whom society is a field for illicit and, above all, selfish harvests and who, besotted with death, theft, hypocrisy, paranoia, and ugly sex, give back a
portrait of society horrifyingly consistent with their values. Just as appropriating male texts results in the subversive disclosure, crime and criminals propose sites where the bondage of self to the culture’s deadening prescriptions may be demonstrated, and perhaps more important, where liberating strategies may be tested (1999:19-20).

Finally then, it can be argued that — despite the extreme nature of her subject matter and the difficult plagiarist style of her intertextual novels — Acker is carrying out a politically optimistic act. She constantly blurs the arbitrary divisions between literature and theory and removes the analysis of subjectivity from the realm of the purely theoretical in a similar, yet more extreme manner to the likes of Sartre, Camus, Ellis and Welsh. Having outlined the possibility of the diminished subject in Acker’s work, and the extent of its philosophical and political content, I shall expand on the notion of the contemporary subject partaking in extreme forms of self expression as a resistance to socially prescribed subjectivity. Therefore, what follows is a focus on certain taboo and extreme aspects of being, and a continued discussion of the predominant interest that many writers have in these seemingly unsavoury aspects of counter-discursive contemporary subjectivity.

5.3.a. Cocaine Nights — J.G. Ballard, Dystopia and the Diminished Subject

Already thinking of a travel article, I noted the features of this silent world: the memory-erasing white architecture; the enforced leisure that fossilized the nervous system; the almost Africanized aspect, but a North Africa invented by someone who had never visited the Maghreb; the apparent absence of any social structure; timelessness of a world beyond boredom, with no past, no future and diminishing present. Perhaps this was what a leisure-dominated future would resemble?

The relevance of J.G. Ballard’s work to this thesis stems from his fundamental interest in the human subject, and his continued relevance as a fiction writer for over fifty years, and nearly fifty novels and short-story collections — stretching back to ‘The Overloaded Man’ in 1956. Although best known for two extremely contrasting novels — the controversial Crash and the hugely popular Empire of the Sun — it is his 1997 novel Cocaine Nights that I shall be discussing. However, despite this focus I shall
make reference to the controversies associated with his wider oeuvre in order to highlight what I believe is Ballard’s continued investigation into the aporia of the diminished subject through fictionalised examples of transgressive subjectivity.

Despite beginning his career as a science fiction writer, Ballard has always maintained a focus on the defamiliarised subject attempting to make sense of recognisable, yet dystopian worlds. His work can be divided roughly into three periods, beginning with the ‘imaginary places’ of the disaster novels *The Drowned World* (1962) and *The Drought* (1964) — wherein with impressive prescience Ballard predicts a future London submerged underwater as the polar ice-caps melt due to global warming and we see the main characters enter a neo-Triassic world of the unknown; and then explores a world where evaporation ceases from over-polluted oceans, civilisation crumbles due to a lack of drinking water, and cannibalism takes hold when food reserves runs out and fish stocks suffocate. In the second period, he focuses on the contemporary violence of a ‘landscape of technology and the communications industry,’ as seen in the memorable *The Atrocity Exhibition* — which was famously pulped prior to publication in the US by Doubleday because of the chapter entitled ‘Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan;’ followed by *Crash*, which featured graphic passages wherein the maimed survivors of crashes have sex in car wrecks, and stage recreations of famous deaths for sexual gratification; then in *High-Rise* we witness civilization break down at a micro-level as the occupants of a luxury apartment block stratify themselves according to their ‘level’ and an internal civil war takes hold; while finally in *Concrete Island* we find the central character — like a contemporary Robinson Crusoe — marooned on a traffic island in the center of a huge freeway intersection, and forced to reassess his meaningless existence. And lastly to his third, most recent prophesies of contemporary subjectivity in the ‘gated’ suburbs of *Cocaine Nights*; in the elite high-tech business parks of *Super-Cannes*; of an English middle-
class in revolt in *Millennium People*; and of the hyper-malls of *Kingdom Come*.

Despite the bleak and often violent nature of Ballard’s novels, his work cannot be associated with nihilistic ‘postmodernism,’ yet despite his clear interest a fragmented subject which in many cases predate this epoch, he has still been given this dubious epithet. In fact, upon closer investigation it appears that quite the opposite is true and that Ballard, much like Camus, has seemingly accepted the *aporia* of the meaningless of existence, and although we find him referred to as a ‘postmodern utopographer’ by the likes of W. Warren Wager, it appears that postmodernism has retrospectively appropriated Ballard’s theories, rather than *vice versa*:

Despite his reputation as a cold-blooded anatomist of disaster and violence, he is in fact a visionary, a postmodern utopographer. His landscapes are heavens; or, rather, liminal worlds through which discerning individuals — and in some Ballardian scenarios, all humanity — must pass to earn salvation. In a moral cosmos, thanks to postmodern sensibility — where good and evil no longer exist, where life and death are the same, where the past and all its prescriptions are dust — the pilgrim cannot pick and choose. Everything becomes delightful, without exception. Pain is pleasure, and pleasure pain. Escaping to a higher consciousness demands immersion in *all* being. Hence, in Ballard’s transvaluation of the traditional Western wisdom, even dystopias are utopian. (1991:11)

Despite referring to Ballard’s texts as postmodern, Wagar’s view of his writing as being other than simply dystopian is important — although I would urge caution before labelling it utopian and transcendental. This point is reiterated by John Gray in ‘Modernity and its Discontents,’ wherein he argues that: “Much of his work concerns solitary, marooned individuals who see society not as a source of support but as an encumbering irrelevance. There is nothing in Ballard of the moralising humanist insistence that every disaster can somehow be transcended. Yet, if Ballard’s stories have a message, it is in no way tragic” (1999:76). That is, rather than positing a certified transcendental utopia leading to a ‘higher consciousness’ Ballard’s fiction instead explores a future for the subject in a world where the ‘encumbering irrelevance’ of hegemonic dictates are deconstructed, and the metaphysical constraints imposed on the subject are increasingly diminished.
Although Ballard does resist the tendency to determine possible future utopias, we find within his work a repeated theme of the subject escaping the aporia of the meaningless existence through the exploration of extreme aspects of subjectivity beyond the dominant cultural dictates, something he explains in an interview with Graeme Revell in the journal RE/Search:

Either you accept/believe that the universe is totally random and meaningless, which is quite possible (a handy attitude to take if you are planning to take the way out, of madness — if you’re choosing that particular exit door from reality). The view that the universe is a meaningless structure is a very useful one — I don’t want to take that particular door. Quite the contrary, I feel (just as my heroes did in The Atrocity Exhibition, Crash and High Rise), that there is some sort of truth to be found …

R/S: In the admission that you have some sort of moral idealistic strain, do you think that there is ‘a’ truth to be found, or do you just believe in the general idea of truth, faith, hope —

JGB: No I don’t.

R/S: You never exactly state the way out. What do you expect the reader to do?

JGB: This is where the open-ended character of my fiction requires the reader himself to make a significant contribution (1984:45).

That is, Ballard remains true to the nature of his medium, recognizing that such explorations are simply fictional postulations, open-ended investigations, and deconstructions of everyday aspects of subjectivity, wherein recognizable characters are placed in equally recognizable locations, dealing with increasingly unrecognizable situations. Yet despite the diverse focus of his fiction, it is the question of subjectivity that remains at the core of his work, something explained by Andrzej Gasiorek in ‘Refugees from Time:’ “A marked feature of Ballard’s exploration of identity is the extent to which he depicts characters as actors inhabiting prescribed personalities, as ciphers going through the motions of life […] Identity is always precarious in Ballard’s work, always one step away from being exposed as a complete sham. And its flimsiness is systematically related to the simulated nature of contemporary social existence” (2005:51). As seen in Ballard’s discussion of global warming in The Drowned World, and the increased impact of technology on contemporary subjectivity in Crash, quite often his novels have a predictive quality that cannot be ignored. As Will Self —
himself a renowned author greatly influenced by Ballard — points out: “Why is J.G. Ballard rated by many (including myself) as the most significant English novelist of the second half of the 20th century? Sitting in his Shepperton semi, Ballard has issued a series of bulletins on the modern world of an almost unerring prescience. Other writers describe; Ballard anticipates. To paraphrase the title of one of his short story collections, he has provided us with our own myths of the near future” (Quoted in the Millennium People front piece). Perhaps with Ballard we have a case of life imitating art, and in the ‘near future’ we may find more of his ‘myths’ becoming increasingly relevant.

5.3.b. Transgressive Behaviour and Extreme Subjectivity

Although Ballard’s career spans over half-a-century, a wider acceptance of the importance of this ‘significant English novelist’ has occurred only recently, and has seen him decline the offer of a CBE — Commander of the British Empire — and receive his own entry in the Collins English Dictionary wherein ‘Ballardian’ is defined as a genre of writing: “Resembling or suggestive of the conditions described in J.G. Ballard’s novels and stories, especially dystopian modernity, bleak man-made landscapes and the psychological effects of technological, social or environmental developments” (Quoted in Morrison:2006:60). However, as seen with the initial controversy regarding both the 1973 publication of Crash, and the 1997 David Cronenberg filmic adaptation, the transgressive elements of his work still cause outrage and led for calls for the film to be banned in the UK. Despite the growing popularity and grudging acceptance of the importance, and quality, of Ballard’s writing the stigma associated with his oeuvre remains. This tendency can be seen in Murray Walden’s review of Kingdom Come in the September 9-10 Weekend Australian Review of 2006, wherein the counter-discursive adjectives fly freely:

Think eccentric, disturbing, iconoclastic, searching, genre-busting, poetic, idealistic, humorous and bleak: all fit Ballard’s work. He’s someone whose every utterance is seized on by fans and analysed for significance. He’s both a cult figure and (now) a
respected man of letters. Yet the man who welcomes me into his study with
grandfatherly gusto looks more like an absent minded university professor than a don
of subversion (2006:8).

And the fact that this most recent publication by the near octogenarian\(^\text{12}\) ‘don of
subversion’ can still engender such an ecstatic response indicates his importance to this
thesis of the diminished subject.

Although much has been written about \textit{Crash}, it marks a continuation of my
teleology of counter-discursive literature and makes for an important entry point into
Ballard’s discussion of the transgressive subjectivity.\(^\text{13}\) Despite the problematic
inclusion of Ballard in his text \textit{Postmodern Literature}, Ian Gregson does indicates the
importance of the premise of the fragmented subject in his work, explaining that: “the
crucial concerns of \textit{Crash}, as of science fiction generally, are […] ontological. Where,
ordinary attitudes to the self assume it to be unitary and organic, \textit{Crash} depicts it as
fragmented (sometimes all too literally) and mechanized” (2004:67). That is, rather than
simply viewing the subject as diminished in metaphysical and philosophical terms,
Ballard investigates the literal conjoining, and interdependence, of the corporeal human
subject with technology, with often fatal results as seen when car crashes carry out the
ultimate diminishing of subjectivity. Gregson goes on to explain that for Ballard: “The
crucial image in \textit{Crash} is of a car/human hybrid. Its characters, after their crashes, bear
scars whose imprint can be read so that their bodies remain inscribed with the car parts
with which they have collided. More than this, however, they are metaphorically
invaded by cars, so that their identity has been colonised by car technology” (2004:68).
Thus, in \textit{Crash} Ballard investigates the literal impact of the automobile on subjectivity,
as we see the bodies of car crash victims re-inscribed with scars of sutures, and
drastically reconstituted by amputations and stainless steel pins due to the collision of
the corporeal and the technological, as the subject becomes both physically and
psychologically fragmented.
Not only does Ballard investigate the manner in which the subject is indelibly marked by its increased interaction with technology — something also explored at length in the ‘cyberpunk’ novels of William Gibson — he also indicates the manner in which these transgressive events can stir the subject from the equivalent of ‘bad faith,’ whereby this new form of subjectivity literally deconstructs the notion of the self-present subject. In his interview with Revell he explains that:

There’s a sort of constant struggle on a minute-by-minute basis throughout our lives, throughout every day; one needs to dismantle that smothering conventionalized reality that wraps itself around us. There’s a conspiracy, in which we play our willing part, just to stabilize the world we inhabit, or our small corner of it. One needs at the same time to dismantle that smothering set of conventions that we call everyday reality, and of course violent acts of various kinds, whether they’re car crashes or serious illnesses or any sort of trauma, do have a sort of liberating effect (1984:47).

However, he is quick to point out that this supposed transcendence of the aporia of existence, and the desire for the metaphysics of comfort through extreme experience, does have its own problems when he counters that: “one cannot help one’s imagination being touched by these people who, if at enormous price, have nonetheless broken through the skin of reality and convention around us […] and who have in a sense achieved — become — mythological beings in a way that is only attainable through these brutal and violent acts. One can transcend the self, sadly, in ways which are themselves rather to be avoided — say, extreme illness, car crashes, extreme states of being” (47). That is, for Ballard, the type of transgressive experience necessary to transcend everyday existence is either difficult to obtain or mythical, and must be avoided at all cost, for it either entails great suffering, or the attainment of the nonsensical self-presence of the mentally insane or schizophrenic, and it is on this note of caution that I shall now begin my discussion of Cocaine Nights.

5.3.c. Cocaine Nights — A Cautionary Tale of the Transgressive

In Cocaine Nights we find Ballard reassessing the possible future of contemporary subjectivity by changing his focus to the possible endpoint of the growing popularity of
securely self-contained ‘gated suburbs,’ and the self-regulation of acceptable behaviour therein. Yet rather than setting his investigation in the dreary outer-suburbs of English towns and cities, Ballard — like so many British retirees — follows the sun and locates *Cocaine Nights* in two seemingly idyllic resort towns on the Spanish coast. Yet behind the gloss of perfection we find Charles Prentice arrive in Estrella de Mar to the news that his brother Frank has confessed to murdering five residents in a horrific house fire. Filled with incredulity Charles begins his own investigation into the murders and the charismatic Bobby Crawford, uncovering a world of appearances with a seedy undercurrent of transgressive behaviour. Far from ideal, Charles discovers that beneath the thriving arts community and hugely popular sports environment, the residents are engaged in petty theft, burglary, casual sex, prostitution, Class A drug use, violent pornography and, as Charles himself witnesses, rape which he is later informed ‘keeps the girls on their toes!’ Ballard explains his focus on transgressive behaviour in a community designed to prevent just that, in an interview with Varona Bennett:

I am fascinated by the psychology of gated communities and the England of the M25. Not Heritage England or Heritage London — rather, the business parks and executive housing, CCTV cameras, airports. A lot of the scenarios I’ve thought of have come true. When we look back over the last thirty years, meaningless violence has become very common […] It’s not certain if any of the people who carry out these atrocities have any justification, even in their own minds. It may be violence for violence’s sake. That’s dangerous because you can’t predict it. Maybe people are so bored and modern life is so empty that they want to drop a bomb or kill someone just to feel alive (2004:5).

And it is this desire to feel alive in the boring perfection of a future life of leisure, free from violent crime, where ‘everything’ is available and the weather ideal that motivates both *Cocaine Nights* and *Super-Cannes*. As he explains: “if, as a science fiction writer, you asked me to make a prediction about the future, I would sum up my fear about the future in one word: boring. And that’s my one fear: that everything has happened: nothing exciting or new or interesting is ever going to happen again … the future is just going to be a vast, conforming suburb of the soul … nothing new will happen, no
breakouts will take place” (Juno:1984:8). As such, *Cocaine Nights* acts as an investigation into the future outcome of a world of gated suburbs and bored retirees of an increasingly younger age, and the manner in which Crawford attempts to raise these increasingly opaque subjects from their self-induced torpor.14 As Crawford warns Charles, when he witnesses the extent of this apathy first-hand: “It’s the fourth world, Charles. The one waiting to take over everything” (1997:215).15

Soon Charles realises that tennis coach — and all-round good-guy — Bobby Crawford is the instigator of this transgressive behaviour, and before long he too is under the spell of the messianic-like blond Adonis, and caught up in his plans to liberate the oppressed inhabitant of the nearby Residencia Costasol as he has those of Estrella de Mar. Crawford explains the manner in which crime can defamiliarise the everyday leading to the subject to reassess the seemingly a priori: “The break-ins are like the devout Catholic’s wristlet that chafes the skin and sharpens the moral sensibility. The next burglary fills you with anger, even a self-righteous rage. The police are useless, fobbing you off with vague promises, and that generates a sense of injustice, a feeling that you’re surrounded by a world without shame. Everything around you, the paintings the silverware you take for granted, fit into this new moral framework. You’re more aware of yourself. Dormant areas of your mind that you haven’t visited for years become important again. You begin to reassess yourself” (244). Lance Olsen expands on this point in a review of *Cocaine Nights* suggesting that:

Behind what turns out to be a bizarre social experiment stands a charismatic figure that believes such crimes are the only things that keeps us interesting, creative, and alive as a culture. The result, as one of the characters comments, ‘is Kafka re-shot in the style of Psycho.’ Ballard thereby transforms the murder mystery into a philosophical mode of inquiry that explores the conjunction of the imaginative act and the lawless postmodern zone where everything is possible, while suggesting that transgressive behaviour might in the end — at least in some cases — actually motivate public good (1997:267).

That is, by equating criminality with creativity, Crawford deterministically believes he has stumbled on the answer to the apathy and boredom that seems ready to engulf the
contemporary subject, and sees it as his life’s work to both literally and figuratively ‘inject’ the community with the transgressive, in order to defamiliarise the everyday a priori meaninglessness of existence.\textsuperscript{16} This view is also held by Gasiorek who explains that: “Criminality, violence and psychopathology are defended not only as the paths along which a truth of self may be discovered, but also a sole means of resisting a streamlined and controlling polity. The rhetoric which draws on romantic-expressivist philosophies, equates psychological health with ‘deviant’ behaviour, and of course in an administered and seemingly meaningless world celebrations of the instinctual self are bound to carry a good deal of weight” (2005:50). However, in this exploration of the anything-goes mentality of a lawless ‘postmodern zone,’ and the apparent freedom these transgressive acts give the individual, there is an undercurrent of caution.

The link between crime, mental illness, sexual deviancy and creativity is well-known\textsuperscript{17} — and famously articulated in the lives and writing of Jean Genet, Joe Orton, William Burroughs, Oscar Wilde, Thomas d’ Quincy, and recent Booker winner D.B.C Pierre — as too is the fear of the future of creativity without these transgressions. However, there lies within the content of such creative outpourings an inherent danger, for as Ballard indicates: “That’s the problem with this stuff — unless you’re using it in some sort of informed way, out of some sort of imaginative commitment … you are in danger of being numbed by the very powerful stimuli that attracted you in the first place. I mean you end up with the worst of both worlds! You know — the ‘after we get bored with car crashes, what do we move onto next?’ sort of thing. You need a higher and higher charge of sensation — it’s only child victims of psychotic killers who interest you. Then what’s next?” (Juno:1984:19). And it is the question of ‘what next’ that curbs Ballard’s delight at the possibilities of transgressive behaviour as a tool to free the subject from the dominant cultural and hegemonic dictates. Instead, he indicates the inherent problems associated with a society free to carry out transgressive
behaviour, for as we are informed: “Deviance in Estrella de Mar was a commodity
under jealous guard” (1997:135), and that guard is an increasingly messianic and
dictatorial Bobby Crawford with the transgression of the taboo his drug of choice.18

Very soon the residents of Estrella de Mar and Residencia Costasol are in need of
greater doses of meaningless violence in order to maintain the euphoria peddled by
Crawford, and take it upon themselves to carry on his ‘good work,’ which soon spreads
like a virus and culminates in the five deaths. As Bennett indicates, in the aptly titled
‘J.G. Ballard: Finding Meaning in Meaningless Times,’ the residents: “felt so privileged
that they believed they had gone not only beyond the common run of men, but even
beyond God. Yet the stultifyingly perfect environment in which they chose to live […]
gradually persuaded them to drift into ever more bizarre games of violence, destruction
and self-destruction. Light-hearted shoplifting, or on the spot spontaneous joyriding in
someone else’s car, gave way to concerted cruelty, ritualized rape or meaningless
murder — anything to feel alive again” (2004:10-11). Dr Hamilton articulates this view
to Charles as she witnesses her clientele reducing as the residents take on a new lease of
life, abandoning sedatives and neuroses in favour of Crawford’s antidote to apathy:

‘The place was filled with your patients. Not so many now, I dare say.’
‘Almost none at all.’ She placed her valise on my desk and sat beside it nodding to
herself. ‘A few leukaemias I send back to London. Shin-splints from all this
unnecessary exercise. Even a few cases of VD. But a little old-fashioned gonorrhoea
wouldn’t surprise you.’
‘Not really.’ I shrugged tolerantly. ‘You’d expect it, given the bigger turnover of
sexual partners. It’s a disease of social contact — like flu, or golf.’
‘There are other social diseases, some a lot more serious — like a taste for kiddie-
porn.’
‘Pretty rare in the Residencia.’
‘But surprisingly contagious.’ Paula treated me to her severest schoolmistressy gaze.
‘People who think they’re immune suddenly catch a rogue cross-infection from all
the other porn they’re looking at.’ (1997:292)

Thus, we find a certain moralizing in Ballard’s novel as he questions the limits of
transgressive behaviour, for if one begins breaking down the supposedly oppressive
discursive constraints placed on the subject, where does one stop? Charles
acknowledges this fear in the opening passage of the book wherein he explains that, as a journalist: “Crossing frontiers is my profession. Those strips of no-man’s land between the checkpoints always seem such zones of promise, rich with the possibilities of new lives, new scents and affections. At the same time they set off a reflex of unease that I have never been able to repress” (9). Despite the possibilities the transgressive offers as a site of contestation enabling the ‘passage’ of the subject into future ‘zones of promise,’ Ballard urges an awareness of the necessity of certain taboos, feeling an ‘unease’ toward anarchy, especially given what this all too often entails for the innocent and vulnerable. He also indicates the dangers of Crawford’s deterministic approach to the future freedom of subjectivity — wherein we find any voice of dissent eliminated, hence the five murders — and after failing to convince Charles of the danger of Crawford’s darker side, Paula Hamilton takes it on herself to murder him in an attempt to halt the chaos and restore order. She does this primarily to save the life of psychiatrist Dr. Sanger — Crawford’s next victim and object of hate — who he sees as a figure of oppression sedating and stifling the freedom and creativity of the vulnerable Laurie — a drug dependent girl he sexually abuses while in his care. However, when Crawford ‘liberates’ Laurie, he turns her into a mindless, drug-fueled prostitute and porn-star arguing that: “Laurie never wanted to be happy […] She’s one of those people who flinch from the very idea of happiness — in her mind nothing could be more boring or bourgeois” (302). In Ballard’s world neither the psychiatrist, nor the messiah of the transgressive, escape vilification, leaving us ambivalent as to the validity of either’s view of the future of contemporary subjectivity.

5.3.e. In Summation — J.G. Ballard

Finally then, although it appears that much of the criticism levelled against the ‘don of the subversive’ is problematic, and that while Ballard’s novels optimistically postulate, in a non-deterministic fashion, a future subjectivity free from certain hegemonic dictates
through investigations of extreme and transgressive behaviour, they are quite clearly morally driven cautionary tales. Despite the continued conservative criticism of his work, there are those such as Rex Roberts who argue the opposite, suggesting that: “But for all the superficial, almost parodic intimations of pornography in his prose, and despite his undisguised admiration for his devilish villains, Ballard seems more moralist than nihilist. His book paints an alarming picture of the present, not to mention the future, suggesting that Western society would do well to re-examine its values and rethink its direction” (1998:75). This tendency to deconstruct the a priori roles mapped onto the contemporary subject — and posit a future beyond the current aporia — is best articulated by Ballard who humbly points out that: “I just write what I see happening. I’m a weatherman, just trying to forecast what’s ahead” (Quoted in Morrison:2006:60), and as we have seen, many of his predications have been unerringly accurate. Wagar further explains the importance of his explorations of subjectivity arguing that:

The only serious question for critics on the left is whether his writings do and can make a positive contribution to social transformation. So far, from all the available hard evidence, they have not made much. His writings are not perceived, generally, as tracts for world revolution. But perhaps they deserve to be. Perhaps, like the works of de Sade, Nietzsche, and Kafka, they will exert their greatest influence long after Ballard is no longer with us. I would like to think so (1991:18).

And it is with this in mind that I urge for a continued interest in Ballard’s philosophical investigations into the transgressive, the defamiliarisation of the everyday aporia of diminished subjectivity, and his position as the prophet of the condition of the possibility of change.

5.4.a. American Psycho — Bret Easton Ellis and the Diminished Subject

Everything failed to subdue me. Soon everything seemed dull: another sunrise, the lives of heroes, falling in love, war, the discoveries people made with each other. The only thing that didn’t bore me, obviously enough, was how much money Tim Price made, yet in its obviousness it did. There wasn’t a clear, identifiable emotion within me, except for greed and, possibly, total disgust. I had all the characteristics of a human being — flesh, blood, skin, hair — but my depersonalization was so intense, had gone so deep, the normal ability to feel compassion had been eradicated, the victim of a slow, purposeful erasure. I was simple imitating reality, a rough
resemblance of a human being, with only a dim corner of my mind functioning. Something horrible was happening and yet I couldn’t figure out why.

Any discussion regarding controversial value judgments of contemporary literature in relation to the diminished subject must necessarily include Bret Easton Ellis’ much loved, and loathed, American Psycho. Given that arguments regarding its depiction of explicit violence towards women of all social milieus, men of all colours and creeds, dogs of all breeds, and — breaking all taboos — small children are well known, rather than reiterating them I shall begin with an outline of the predominant outcry against this apparent ‘postmodern’ text and its author, before carrying out a re-reading of the novel in light of the proposition of the diminished subject. What follows then, is not a focus on the inherent violence in this novel, but rather a discussion of the incessant questioning of subjectivity replete throughout this text.

Having already achieved widespread success with his first novel, Less Than Zero (1985) — quickly adapted to film in 1987 starring enfant terrible Robert Downy Jr. — by the time he came to write American Psycho in 1989, and despite the comparative failure of his second novel The Rules of Attraction (1987),19 Ellis’ stock was definitely on the rise. However, while his publisher Simon & Shuster had advanced the then 25 year-old an unheard of $300,000 (US) for this novel, controversy soon arose following the leak of sexually explicit and violent excerpts to the media, causing Ellis to part company with his publisher while — like a literary Sex Pistols — he walked away with the money.20 The extent of this controversy, was explained later by Ellis:

I knew there was a lot of pre-controversy and there were problems in-house and the guy who did my covers before backed away saying it was the most disgusting thing he had ever read, blahblahblah. [...] I was totally shocked [...] This was the last thing in the world I thought would happen. I thought maybe they would publish the book and maybe people would be upset by it, I guess, but I never thought they would not publish the book and I never thought that, for example, the National Organization for Women would call for a boycott of the book, or the book would cause this kind of fury. I just didn’t think this was going to happen. I didn’t think there was enough in the book to make it that shocking (Quoted in Tighe:2005:105).
A mere four weeks prior to publication, and despite Ellis’ protestations regarding the use of context free quotations used to condemn his novel, he found himself without a publisher and on the receiving end of vitriol of unheard of fury. Despite these setbacks Random House agreed to publish the novel eventually releasing it in 1991, sparking yet more controversy, not least from the aforementioned National Organization for Women. As Elizabeth Young states in her article ‘The Beast in the Jungle, the Figure in the Carpet,’ the extreme response to its publication gave way to a predominantly negative ‘psychodrama’ as seen when: “Roger Roseblatt in *The New York Times*, under the headline ‘Snuff This Book,’ described it as ‘the most loathsome offering of the season.’ *Time* spoke of ‘the most appalling acts of torture, murder and dismemberment ever described in a book targeted for the Best-Seller lists.’ Tammy Bruce of NOW said it was ‘a how-to manual on the torture and dismemberment of women’ and called for a national boycott of the book. Gloria Steinem suggested that Ellis would have to take responsibility for any women tortured and killed in the same manner as described in the book” (1992:132).

Young goes on to argue that: “In all this media fall-out, these shrieks of ‘the literary equivalent of a snuff film’ and ‘pure trash’ there is a notable absence of any literary criticism” (133). Needless to say, this work of fiction was rarely treated as such, and the distinction between content and context, and author and character, were continually confused. The tendency to conflate Ellis and Patrick Bateman, and for calls to make him responsible for any acts of violence that could be attributed to his text astounded him, for as Young continues: “He said what might be expected, that the book was a work of fiction and should speak for itself. He was quite clear about his position: ‘The acts described in the book are truly indisputably vile. The book itself is not. Patrick Bateman is a monster. I am not. The outrage that has been expressed is totally disconnected from what the book is about’” (132). Furthermore, as James Gardener
argues, if Ellis was attempting to write a culturally critical ‘transgressive text’ then this was in itself nothing new, and instead marks a continuation of a tradition in which literature of an extreme nature can be viewed as a direct response to a perceived cultural crisis: “The roots of transgressive literature that violently attacks the center of a culture, are ancient, reaching all the way back from Euripides’ Bacchae, through Marlowe and Webster and the Marquis de Sade, to Huysmans and Celine. This literature of self-defined immorality, anguish, and degradation is constantly waxing and waning in our culture, as, for its part, is the humanistic strain” (1996:54). Despite this pre-postmodern perspective of transgressive literature, we find many commentators arguing that American Psycho is a temporally specific critique of late capitalism, and among those is Carl Tighe who states that:

Patrick Bateman is an example of what Hannah Arendt called ‘the banality of evil’. That’s basically what he is. He could have existed a hundred years ago (he probably existed five hundred years ago). He’ll probably exist five hundred years from now. He is just an example of the constantness of evil. He might be a creature of the eighties with all the trappings that implies, but I think he’s really a creature of eternity. Man doesn’t necessarily change for the better depending on the decade, or depending upon how ten years have passed. I think man is born and is corrupted and is always capable of badness. Capable of goodness, but badness gets more attention (2005:115).

While not wishing to enter into a debate regarding ‘good’ and ‘evil’ here, what is important is Tighe’s perspective of Bateman as a fictional investigation into extreme aspects of subjectivity that predate not only capitalism but also the ‘postmodern condition.’ However, despite this view, Ellis has been attacked for being the standard bearer for postmodern writing whose texts supporting the nihilistic view of the schizophrenic postmodern subject. This perspective is supported by Carla Freccero in her article ‘Historical Violence, Censorship and the Serial Killer,’ who argues that: “The political loss for progressives, in denouncing American Psycho, has been a victory for conservatives, who decry modern popular culture and the ‘twentysomething’ Generation X’s postmodern approach, which they interpret as a revitalization of values,
a lack of a moral framework, and as producing a world without civilization, without decency” (1997:160). That is, for Freccero, criticisms of American Psycho by seemingly liberal sections of the literary and critical establishment have seen it closely aligned with those predominantly negative perspectives of postmodernism and contemporary literature, thus giving ammunition to the conservatives who wish to silence and censor these counter-discursive voices.

5.4.b. Bret Easton Ellis and The Postmodern Condition

LAUREN — Wake up. Saturday morning. Tutorial on the postmodern condition. Believe it or not. At ten. In Dickinson. It’s October already and we’ve only had one session. I doubt there is anyone else in the class. I was the only one at the first meeting a month ago and Conroy was so drunk he lost the rollsheet […] Walk up to Dickinson. And … guess what. Conroy’s asleep on the couch in his office. Office reeks of marijuana. Marijuana pipe on desk next to bottle of Scotch. Sit at the desk, not surprised, unfazed and smoke a cigarette, watch Conroy sleep. Getting up? No, he’s not. Put the cigarette out. Leave. Victor recommended this course to me.


‘Believe it or not,’ given repeated protestations throughout this thesis, not only do I oppose the notion of a temporally specific ‘condition’ afflicting the contemporary subject, I take exception to Bret Easton Ellis being labelled a postmodern writer. Although based in part on my own teleology of the diminished subject, we see within Ellis’ novels humorous asides that further undermine the predominant perspectives of postmodernism besides the aforementioned epigraph. In his second novel, The Rules of Attraction, we find him attacking the very form of literature he is accused of producing, when Sean Bateman — the younger brother of Patrick — attends a farewell party for Creative Writing tutor Vittorio at Camden College, who is being replaced by “some drunk who was fired from the Lit staff at Harvard” (190):

‘Not only Joyce, but it reminded me a lot of Acker’s work,’ Trav is saying. ‘Has anyone read by the way, Crad Kilodney’s Lightning Struck My Dick? It’s amazing, amazing.’ He shakes his head […] I sit back, stifle a yawn, drink more of the beer. Trav turns to Vittorio. ‘But Vittorio, let me ask you, don’t you think that the admittedly Bohemian punk outlaw scribbling of these wasted post-Vietnam, post-Watergate, post-… hell, post-everything minstrels, is the product of the literary establishment bombasting a lost generation with worthless propaganda exploiting
greed, blasé sexual attitudes and mind-corrupting, numbing jejunosity and that’s why works like *Just Another Asshole*, a searing, searing collection of quote-unquote underground writing, become potent fixtures on the minds of this clan of maladjusted, nihilistic, malcontent, self-serving ... well, hell, miscarriages, or do you think it’s all ...’ And now Trav stops, searches for the right word. ‘... bogus?’ [...] ‘Um ... bogus?’ Vittorio mumbles. ‘What is this bogus ... I have not read the book’ (197-8)

Thus, we see in Vittorio — who has no idea what Trav is talking about — the old-guard showing its ignorance of the literary pretensions of the new generation while Ellis — echoing Mark Davis’ perspective in *Gangland* — asks whether this negative perspective of contemporary literature is a construct of the conservative establishment, positing that this negative reaction to so-called postmodern literature is in fact ‘bogus,’ just as *Lightning Struck My Dick* and *Just Another Asshole* are humorous are pastiches of the titles one would expect of postmodern texts.

The question of the ‘post-’ in postmodernism is a repeated theme in *American Psycho* as Batman’s sole consumption of non-business information comes from gossip columns, such as the seemingly trashy *Post* magazine. At various times throughout the text we find Bateman being informed of the hyper-reality of contemporary New York life by reading *Post*, and find him entertainingly discussing “post-California cuisine” (1991:94) at a trendy new restaurant called Deck Chairs, and becoming alarmed about the sighting of a new hybrid creature in Harlem:

[M]y eye catches a story about recent sightings of these creatures that seem to be part bird, part rodent — essentially pigeons with the heads and tails of rats — found deep in the center of Harlem [...] A grainy photograph of one of those things accompanies the article, but experts, the *Post* assures us, are fairly certain this new breed is a hoax. As usual this fails to soothe my fear, and it fills me with a nameless dread that someone out there has wasted the energy and time to think this up: to fake a photograph [...] and to send it to the *Post*, then for the *Post* to decide to run the story [...], to print the photograph, to have someone write about the photo and interview the experts, finally to run this story on page three of today’s edition and have it discussed over hundreds and thousands of lunches in the city this afternoon. I close the paper and lie back, exhausted (115).

Thus we find Bateman literally ‘exhausted’ by the info-tainment of contemporary society, as the vague simulacra of legitimate information reaches its nadir in
publications like *Post*, wherein we are made aware of the time, effort and resources invested in producing a story about a hyper-real ‘rat-bird’ which *Post* calmly assures us it is ‘fairly certain’ is a hoax.

While all texts are replete with multiple interpretations and all readings are subjective in nature, I believe that Ellis has created in Bateman his own hyper-real simulacra of the subject of the ‘postmodern condition’ taken to its extreme limits, and undermines, rather than supports, this temporally specific disorder. This occurs repeatedly as we find Patrick hilariously parodying ‘the death of history’ wherein time and experience become a blur of meaningless dinner engagements with unimportant people, and we realise that the consumption of *nouvelle cuisine* in different trendy restaurants has become his sole *raison d’être*: “I’m experiencing a major-league anxiety attack […] I’ve forgotten who I had lunch with earlier and, even more important, where. Was it Robert Ailes at Beats? Or was it Todd Hendricks at Ursula’s, the new Philip Duncan Holmes bistro in Tribeca? Or was it Ricky Worrell and were we at December’s? Or would it have been Kevin Weber at Contro in NoHo? Did I order the partridge sandwich on brioche with green tomatoes, or a big plate of endive with clam sauce? ‘Oh god, I can’t remember,’ I moan” (149). We find him articulating the trivialities of contemporary culture as he suffers an existential crisis regarding his brand of styling mousse while at the latest bistro Vanities: “I stop tapping my foot and slowly scan the restaurant, the bistro, wondering how my hair really looks, and suddenly I wish I had switched mousses because since I last saw my hair, seconds ago, it feels different, as if its shape was somehow altered on the walk from the bar to the table. A pang of nausea that I am unable to stifle washes warmly over me” (231). And we finally find him discussing the meaninglessness of existence with Detective Kimball who is investigating the disappearance of Paul Owen, who Patrick may, or may not have killed:

‘Do you suspect foul play?’
‘Can’t say,’ he says. ‘But like I told you, I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s just hiding
out someplace.’
‘I mean no one’s dealing with the homicide squad yet or anything, right?’ I ask.
‘No, not yet. As I said, we’re not sure. But …’ He stops, looks dejected. ‘Basically
no one has seen or heard anything.’
‘That’s so typical, isn’t it?’ I ask.
‘It’s just strange,’ he agrees, staring out the window, lost. ‘One day someone’s
walking around, going to work, alive, and then …’ Kimball stops, fails to complete
the sentence.
‘Nothing,’ I sigh, nodding.
‘People just … disappear,’ he says.
‘The earth just opens wide and swallows people,’ I say, somewhat sadly, checking
my Rolex.
‘Eerie,” Kimball yawns, stretching. ‘Really eerie.’
‘Ominous.’ I nod my agreement.
‘It’s just’ — he sighs, exasperated — ‘futile.’
I pause, unsure of what to say, and come up with ‘Futility is hard to deal with’ (276).

Ironically we see Patrick absent-mindedly discussing the meaninglessness of existence
in one the novels’ few meaningful conversations, while checking his Rolex so as not to
miss yet another ‘futile’ lunch engagement. While allegations of a lack of content and
character development in American Psycho abound, it is my contestation that
Bateman’s bizarre and questionable behaviour is born out of an acute awareness of the
futile nature of being, and acts as an obvious progression of Clay’s ‘Disappear Here’
mantra from Less Than Zero. As such, I shall now turn my attention to what I consider
to be the underlining theme of American Psycho, that is, the question of an a priori
diminished contemporary subjectivity as distinct from the subject suffering the crisis of
the postmodern condition.

5.4.c. American Psycho and Ellis’ Oeuvre — Inter-textual character development
Repeated criticisms of American Psycho which stem from Bateman’s seemingly
unmotivated acts of violence, unsatisfactory character development and the novel’s non-
linear narrative, supposedly justify this text’s undeserved postmodern epithet. However,
as Elizabeth Young explains, it appears that Ellis brings to his texts an acute
understanding of post-structuralist notions of the arbitrary nature of language in all
forms of communication and any given narrative of the self:
It seems as though Ellis is re-enforcing the fact that Patrick’s only ‘existence’ is within fiction. And we know from Roland Barthes just how bizarre is the fictional construct, how illogical, incongruous and contradictory is the contract between writer and reader. We know too how much time postmodern fiction has spent in deconstructing and disentangling the implicit agreements that lie behind fictive ‘realism.’ Ellis, in one of his interviews, has challenged the expectation: ‘That novels must have a traditional narrative structure … You would think that most writers in their twenties would want to fool around a little bit — would want to write something a little bit subversive.’ Any reading of American Psycho must take these intentions into account (1992:141).

While I would argue against the specific focus on the ‘bizarre’ literary nature of the fictional subject, and of Young’s conflation of Barthes, Ellis and deconstruction as postmodern, it is apparent that any reading of American Psycho must consider that Ellis is possibly engaging with multiple issues of subjectivity, language and culture. It is my proposal that he deliberately explores this loss of metaphysical certitude, and the impact of the supposed ‘postmodern condition,’ on a fictional subject in much the same way that Camus explored the ultimate extent of existential nihilism in The Outsider, and with much the same result.

Despite Bateman’s supposed lack of character development, I would argue that a more complete picture is available if one considers The Rules of Attraction and American Psycho as mutually dependent narratives. Ellis explains that the characterization of Bateman was based on his own view of the superficial nature of contemporary culture stating that: “I was writing about a society in which the surfaces became the only thing. Everything was surface — food, clothes — that is what defined people. So I wrote a book that is all surface action; no narrative, no characters to latch onto, flat, endlessly repetitive” (Quoted in Freccero:1997:158). However, what he fails to explain is that American Psycho can in fact be viewed as a further development of Bateman’s character that rewards the loyalty of those who read the story of his brother Sean in The Rules of Attraction. In Writing and Responsibility, Carl Tighe emphasises this apparent lack of narrative content arguing that: “while we know almost nothing of Bateman’s life before the novel begins it is clear that his father was very wealthy, that
Bateman was well educated, that Bateman need not work for a living and that he was probably dangerously disturbed before he started work on Wall Street” (2005:115). While this remains true if we view American Psycho in isolation, reading The Rules of Attraction not only gives us a greater insight into Patrick’s character, it tantalises us with a possible understanding of his apparent violent behaviour.

Although allusions to Bateman’s parents in The Rules of Attraction are scarce, they do help build up a picture of his familial background and give insight into their almost complete absence from American Psycho. Firstly, we find Sean discussing a birthday party held several years previously explaining that: “This was two months after he [his father] had mother committed to Sandstone and the thing I most remember about that birthday was the fact that no one mentioned it. No one ever mentioned it except for Patrick, who in confidence to me, whispered, ‘It was about time’” (1987:233). While not being privy to what kind of institution Sandstone is, this explains his Mother’s absence and intrigues us as to her condition. In American Psycho, on the other hand we find Patrick discussing Sean with Nicholas — presumably a financial advisor standing in for absent parents — urging him to: “‘Tell him your mother is … worse.’ I mulled over this tactic, then said, ‘He might not care.’ ‘Tell him …’ Nicholas paused, then cleared his throat and rather delicately proposed, ‘it has to do with her estate’” (1991:224). Thus, it appears that Sean’s sole interest in his Mother involves his inheritance and leaves her condition intriguingly unanswered. Later we find Patrick visiting her and we become aware of the awkward nature of their relationship: “My mother and I are sitting in her private room at Sandstone, where she is now a permanent resident. Heavily sedated, she has her sunglasses on and keeps touching her hair and I keep looking at my hands, pretty sure that they’re shaking. She tries to smile when she asks me what I want for Christmas. I’m not surprised how much effort it takes to raise my head and look at her” (365). While still unsure of her ailment we do find out that the
sunglasses are: “black Ray-Bans I bought her from Bloomingdales that cost two-hundred dollars” (366), and that wearing them indoors may, or may not be a polite appreciation of this suitably inappropriate gift from her eldest son, or perhaps indicates another issue. Furthermore, when asked: “How was the party?” (366), we realise this must be Sean’s birthday and that the two texts share time line, and that we are viewing two separate, yet temporally interconnected, stories from different perspectives.

Unlike his mother, Patrick’s father is physically absent in both novels, and although apparently alive in *The Rules of Attraction*, his state of health is questionable as we find out when Patrick and Sean discuss the future of the latter at a hospital following his arrival in New York in their father’s personal Lear jet:

‘What are you going to do?’ I ask.
‘What do you mean?’ He almost looks surprised.
‘I mean are you going to get a job?’
‘Not at Dad’s place,’ he says.
‘Well, where then?’ I ask him. It’s a fair question.
‘What do you think?’ he asks. ‘Suggestions?’
‘I’m asking you,’ I tell him.
‘Because? …’ He lifts his hands up, leaves them suspended there for a moment.
‘Because you’re not going to last another term at that place,’ I let him know.
‘How about the son your father wanted?’ I ask.
‘You think that thing in there even cares?’ he asks back, laughing, pointing a thumb back at the corridor, sniffing hard (1987:239).

From this we gather that his father — referred to by Sean as ‘that thing’ — is seriously ill, and judging by Sean’s sarcastic choice of potential career moves, it is probably a neurological disorder. Furthermore, Sean’s outright rejection of work at his father’s firm supports the suggestion alluded to in *American Psycho*, that Patrick is working as a stockbroker at P & P despite the firm being owned by his father, presumably to assert his own independence. Sean’s rejection of his family is not limited to his parents and we are left wondering, when he scoffs at Patrick’s probing with “What you do?” if this is simply a show of disgust at his profession, or alludes to something more sinister? Most importantly, we remain curious regarding his father’s hospitalization, for as we find out
when Patrick visits his mother and describes a photograph of him as a younger man: “there’s something the matter with his eyes” (1991:366).

5.4.d. Re-Reading *American Psycho* — A Question of Identity

Despite the controversy surrounding *American Psycho*, those few positive critical responses tend to view it as a postmodern critique of late consumer capitalism and the ‘greed is good’ ethos of the corpulent corporate nineteen-eighties. While I support this interpretation to an extent, it is my contestation that its primary theme is the question of fragmented subjectivity and the loss of certitude seen with the problematising of the metaphysics of presence that clearly predate the ‘postmodern condition.’ While prescribing this critique of capitalism Young indicates that Ellis’ use of consumer items to describe various characters throughout the novel, not only indicates the vacuous nature of identity based merely on appearance, it articulates a lack of individuality, explaining that: “by his rigid adherence to adspeak dress-code for his characters, Ellis continues his emphasis upon deindividualization in contemporary society. Finally, and very ironically, Ellis’s *sic* use of detailed dress-code to obliterate rather than define character in the traditional sense ends up contributing to the mechanics of the plot in an entirely traditional sense — the ‘plot’ such as it, eventually turns upon the impossibility of anyone distinguishing one character from another” (1992:139). Thus, we see rampant consumerism failing to quell this latest crisis of subjectivity following the loss of the metaphysic of presence, indicating that this attempt to overcome the meaninglessness of existence is not specific to contemporary capitalist society but recurrent.

The question of identity, of misrecognition and the facile fixation on appearance becomes a kind of mantra to Bateman, and is clearly articulated when he explains that: “Even though I am more handsome than Craig, we both look pretty much the same” (1991:250). The extent of this obsession can be seen when he ‘thinks’ he catches a glimpse of a colleague in the street: “Someone who looks almost exactly like Jason
Taylor — black slicked hair, navy double-breasted cashmere coat with a beaver collar, black leather boots, Morgan Stanley — passes beneath a street lamp and nods as I turn down the volume on the Walkman to hear him say ‘Hello Kevin’ and I catch a whiff of Grey Flannel” (162). The irony of this being that although Bateman cannot accurately identify the individual in the gloom of a street light, he manages to describe with detail not only his entire apparel, but also his scent. Furthermore, while being unsure if this is indeed Jason Taylor, Patrick is himself mistaken for someone called Kevin. As Young goes on to explain: “In a world in which the only relations are economic we remain alienated from any ‘authenticity’ of choice or desire. Patrick has been so fragmented and divided by his insane consumerism that he cannot ‘exist’ as a person” (1992:139). That this consumerism is fueled by lack of self-present subjectivity gives us an insight into the thematic of the fragmented and diminished subject as Bateman is repeatedly mistaken for a variety of different characters\textsuperscript{27} — much like the identical blonde boys in \textit{Less Than Zero} — leaving us to not only question the narrative validity of his character, but to also doubt his ‘true’ identity.

This lack of a definitive self-present subjectivity can be viewed as a humorous deconstruction of consumerism gone mad in an age free from metaphysical certitude, by those still clinging on to the vestiges of a belief in subjectivity beyond the \textit{aporia} of existence. What is far from humorous — although no less important to this discussion of the diminished subject — is the manner in which Ellis completes the deconstruction of the subject by taking Bateman beyond the limits of acceptable moral behaviour — even though these taboos are metaphysical constructs — and to the hypothetical outlands of the nihilistic postmodern subject:

A Richard Marx CD plays on the stereo, a bag from Zabar’s loaded with sourdough onion bagels and spices sits on the kitchen table while I grind bone and fat and flesh into patties, and though it does sporadically penetrate just how unacceptable some of what I am doing actually is, I just remind myself that this thing, this girl, this meat, is nothing, is shit, and along with a Xanax […] this thought momentarily calms me down […] The smell of meat and blood clouds up the condo until I don’t notice it
anymore. And later my macabre joy sours and I am weeping to myself, unable to find solace in any of this, crying out, sobbing ‘I just want to be loved,’ cursing the earth and everything I have been taught: principles, distinctions, choices, morals, compromises, knowledge, unity, prayer — all of it was wrong, without any final purpose. All it came down to was: die or adapt (1991:345).

While not wishing to focus on the graphic violence in his text, I believe that this quote clearly articulates Ellis’ desire to carry out the ultimate deconstruction of subjectivity in a fictional form. While we can theoretically hypothesise the possible outcomes of the lack of certitude in contemporary subjectivity, in *American Psycho* we see Bateman literally deconstruct another subject, while crying out for the metaphysical comfort of love as he recognises the ultimate futility of existence, the meaninglessness of being, and attempts to reconstitute a murdered girl as a meal, without any cooking skills. Perhaps this is an indication of a moral position on Ellis’ part, and a critical parody of so-called postmodern theorists and doomsayers who, unwisely, bandy about theories of post-structuralism and deconstruction while proclaiming the death of the subject, history and culture without the requisite critical skills to do so.

While the majority of interpretations of *American Psycho* view Bateman literally as a serial killer, it is my belief that many of the stylistic elements that have led to Ellis’ work being referred to as postmodern question this proposition. Not all commentators have read the novel as a literal expression of actual events, for as Carl Tighe explains: “Bateman’s admission that the deaths have not been reported in the press, throws the whole narrative into doubt. Has Bateman really been committing murders, or has he been imagining them? Is he a reliable narrator? We have only his word” (2005:113). This narrative doubt is also picked up on by Elizabeth Young, who states that: “He is a Yuppie, a Clone. He is also an extremely unreliable narrator” (1992:136) wherein, we find her justification of *American Psycho* as a postmodern critique of consumer capitalism. However, what is not discussed here is the possibility that Batmen’s ‘unreliable’ narrative is a humorous pastiche of the schizophrenic postmodern subject,
and a cautionary exploration of a theoretically nihilistic endgame. Doubts over Bateman’s identity and the presence of an inherited psychological disorder are replete in this text, as we see him constantly mistaken for others, find him refer to himself in the third person, begin speaking a nonsensical internalised language, and given that his murderous missives and confessions are, by and large, ignored or misheard. Although the surest sign of his insanity, to my mind, come in the most lucid passages of the text when Bateman describes the positive musical merits of Whitney Houston, Huey Lewis and the News — and most ridiculously — Phil Collins at the expense of Peter Gabriel!

Toward the end of the novel we find Bateman undergo an epiphany, with the realisation that the superficial nature of his life was one born out of the failure of metaphysics to provide the certitude of subjectivity. In the following passage we find him describing his existence in terms of a phenomenological approach to life gone horribly wrong:

[W]here there was nature and earth, life and water, I saw a desert landscape that was unending, resembling some sort of crater, so devoid of reason and light and spirit that the mind could not grasp it on any sort of conscious level and if you came close the mind would reel backward, unable to take it in. It was a vision so clear and real and vital to me that in its purity it was almost abstract. This is what I could understand, this was how I had lived my life, what I constructed my movement around, how I dealt with the tangible. This was the geography around which my reality revolved: it did not occur to me, ever, that people were good or that a man was capable of change or that the world could become a better place through one’s taking pleasure in a feeling or a look or a gesture, of receiving another person’s love or kindness. Nothing was affirmative, the term ‘generosity of spirit’ applied to nothing, was a cliché, was some kind of bad joke. Sex is mathematics. Individuality no longer an issue. What does intelligence signify? Define reason. Desire — meaningless. Intellect is not a cure. Justice is dead. Fear, recrimination, innocence, sympathy, guilt, waste, failure, grief, were things, emotions, that no one really felt anymore. Reflection is useless, the world is useless. Evil is its only permanence. God is not alive. Love cannot be trusted. Surface, surface, surface was all that anyone found meaning in (1991:374-5).

Thus, Bateman’s attempts at attaining a self-presence free of metaphysical certitude have failed and his mind has indeed ‘reeled back’ from this aporia, replacing this fundamental recognition with the rampant nihilism of consumer society. He has reached the theoretical limits of the pastiche of the schizophrenic postmodern subject and found
that this ‘disappearance’ of self-presence has not been alleviated by the mere ‘appearance’ of consumer commodities. While Patrick may be certain of the phenomenology of contemporary consumer culture, the subject lurking beneath the surface always already escapes closure, and the limitations of available commodities in turn restrict these surface expressions and further diminishing the subject. Despite his best efforts to exist in a world free of metaphysics, and to explore the ultimate self-present moment of the schizophrenic postmodern subject, in the final passage we find him faced with the a priori aporia of the diminished subject, and the pointless nature of the choices he has made, when he recognises that: “THIS IS NOT AN EXIT” (399).

5.4.e. In Summation — American Psycho and contemporary culture

Ultimately, this reading proves it possible to interpret American Psycho as far more than a ‘how-to’ manual for violence against humans and dogs. Although the use of graphic sexual violence towards women sits uncomfortably with many commentators, the novel can be seen as a defamiliarisation of subjectivity and taboo behaviour, in a culture supposedly desensitised toward violence, and obsessed with the rampant consumption of not only capitalist commodities, but of the planet itself. As Ellis explains:

Art is no longer the great love who is wise, witty, strengthening, tender, wholesomely passionate, secure, life-giving […] now we are far beyond that moral universe — art has now become our need to be terrified. We live in the fear that we are destroying the universe, even as we mine deeper into its secrets. So art may be needed now to provide us with just those fearful insights that the uneasy complacencies of our leaders do their best to avoid (Quoted in Freccero:1997:161).

Ironically then, American Psycho can be seen as an extreme wake-up call for a society engrossed with what now appears an a priori modus operandi, with Bateman an exploration of the selfish schizophrenic consumer searching for self-presence in a world without the certitude of meaning, something that parallels Meursault’s self-destructive nihilism in The Outsider, and Bobby Crawford’s messianic activities in Cocaine Nights.

In much the same way that Camus’ exploration of existential nihilism led him to
recognise the need for the metaphysics of comfort to assuage the meaninglessness of existence, we see in *American Psycho* a similar thematic, for as Young explains:

Although Ellis is skilled at representing contemporary society it would seem that, unlike many postmodern theorists, he maintains a belief in a ‘reality’ or morality somewhere beyond the spectacular blandishment of the hyperreal consumer circus. As it seems unlikely that he inclines towards revolutionary politics, it is natural to think that […] he might have a vision of some more endemic oral universe, pre-postmodern fragmentation and commodity fetishism (1992:146).  

While I continue to disagree with the view of Ellis’ work as postmodern, Young does express a perspective of *American Psycho* as a continuation of the exploration of a non-temporally specific diminished subject, and despite calls to censor this novel, upholds the view that there is an underlying moral concern for the future of the contemporary subject without metaphysical certitude. This position becomes apparent with Bateman’s increasing, albeit confused, affection for: “Jean, my secretary who is in love with me” (1991:105), who, following a dinner date, is determined in the belief of her love for an ideal Patrick, and despite his belief that she too will fall victim to the nihilism of the *aporia* of existence, her conviction soothes and confuses him to the point that he realises for the first time — when observing a new born baby in a ‘return to innocence’ epiphany — that certain metaphysical ideals are necessary: “The baby stares at Jean and me. We stare back. It’s really weird and I’m experiencing a spontaneous kind of internal sensation, I feel I’m moving toward as well as away from something, and anything is possible” (380). Thus, we finally see within Patrick the recognition of the banality of the transparent self-presence he has attained through consumerism, as someone fixated with the superficiality of appearances appears, on the surface at least, to recognise the need for the metaphysics of comfort in a world without certitude, in order to ensure the continued well-being of the contemporary subject, despite terror of the meaninglessness of existence, and the inherent nature of condition of the possibility of change.  

Notes:
Interestingly Will Self — well-known drug user and enfant terrible of the British literary establishment — not only took exception to the depiction of drug use, but carries out ‘a peculiar piece of potential libel,’ by arguing that: “I don’t believe on the basis of having read his book, and having watched the film (with his own imprimatur — to the extent of appearing himself as a dealer), that Irvine Welsh has ever had an injecting drug habit. If he had, I don’t see how he could have counseled the making of a film in which a human tragedy is turned into a source of rich belly laughs” (1996:12). While on the other hand, in his Mix Mag article ‘Irvine Welsh: The Don,’ David Davies argues that although the experiential history of the author is not important, he takes comfort knowing Welsh has used heroin: “Theoretically, it’s probably not really important whether Welsh has actually lived the life because he captures it so well but still I feel happier knowing that he has. Artistic license and all that but it is nonetheless reassuring to find that Welsh isn’t just some superbrain who’s managed to dream up all this shit about drugs and clubbing. His characters may not be based on real people but when you meet him it’s clear that it is Welsh’s own experiences that are feeding these stories” (1996:61).

In Peter Corliss’ review of the filmic adaptation of Trainspotting, we find Welsh and John Hodge explaining the importance of the metaphor: “‘Trainspotting,’ Welsh explains, ‘is the compulsive collection of locomotive engine numbers from the British railway system. But you can’t do anything with the numbers once you’ve collected them.’ Says Hodge, who culled the brilliant screenplay from Welsh’s anecdotal novel. ‘It’s a nice metaphor for doing something that gives your life a bit of structure but it’s ultimately pointless.’ So is the intravenous injection of drugs — a palpable pleasure that wastes time, and often, life” (1996:85).

A disparaging term used to refer to male prostitutes who have sex for money in order to pay the rent.

Niall Lucy makes mention of Acker’s work in his Postmodern Literary Theory: An Introduction and the ‘Introduction’ to Postmodern Literary Theory: An Anthology, as does Dina Sherzer in her paper ‘Postmodernism and Feminism’ in Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction, Brian McHale in his Constructing Postmodernism, and Scott Bukatman in Terminal Identity, to name but a few.

Although it is argued that the subject suffering from mental disorders such as schizophrenia are closest to the notion of original self-present subjectivity, for Acker this is not a viable mode of expression.

In Postmodern Literary Theory, Niall Lucy indicates the manner in which Acker uses the counter-discursive to defamiliarise the arbitrariness of language and the suppression of marginal discourse by the dominant culture, stating that: “Empire of the Senseless could be described as an attempt to set a record for the use of the words ‘fuck’ and ‘cunt,’ which appear on almost every page. By constant repetition, however, they become decreasingly shocking, turning into ‘senseless,’ empty signifiers. After a while they become no more noticeable than punctuation marks which seem to appear in the text only for the sake of some variety rather than according to a systematic set of rules for clarifying and communicating sense” (1997:50).

There is a predominant notion that those who are involved in self-harm, such as drug users, self-mutilators, and those with anorexia, are attempting to gain greater control of their lives by risking the very facticity of their being — that is their bodies.

This position is supported by Stephen Potts who in Postmodern Fiction: A Bio-Bibliographical Guide argues that: “Throughout his career as a writer of novels and short stories, J.G. Ballard has tread [sic] the line between science fiction and the avant-garde. Veterans of the British New Wave regard him as a founder of their movement, which brought to the science fiction of the 1960s and 1970s a set of literary values the genre had not previously demonstrated, a turning away from pure-scientific speculation to the probing of the human soul. Ballard’s fiction is dominated by tortured but terrestrial settings and the tormented people who inhabit them, characters confronting and in general yielding to their own atavistic compulsions” (1986:31).

Ballard explains this himself when quoted in W. Warren Wagar’s ‘J.G. Ballard and the Transformation of Utopia:’ “In 1974 speaking to Robert Loiu, Ballard divided his work, down to that time, into two halves. In the first half through to The Crystal World (1966), he had offered descriptions of ‘imaginary places,’ under the dirtiest inspiration of the surrealist painters; in the second half, beginning with The Atrocity Exhibition (1970), his attention shifted to “the landscape of technology and the communications industry”’ (1991:10-11).

Ballard explains the joy he felt with one particularly vitriolic response to the initial publication to Crash to Graeme Revell: “Yes, that was from Reader’s Report, a piece by the wife of a psychiatrist: ‘The author of this book is beyond psychiatric help’ — which for me meant total artistic success! For a psychiatrist to say ‘you’re beyond psychiatric help’ — in a way, that’s the greatest compliment you can be paid! You’ve achieved freedom then — absolute freedom” (1984:49). With this statement, Ballard gleefully evokes the notion that the only true original representation of subjectivity can be found with the insane or schizophrenic, although he nevertheless makes certain sense himself!

The controversy surrounding the release of the film version of Crash is explained by Carl Tighe in Writing and Responsibility: “In March 1997, after talks with the Home Secretary, the BBFC decided that there was little actual violence in the film, that an actress taking off her clothes inside a crashed vehicle in
order to engage in sex did not pose a threat to public morals, and that while the film dealt with a form of sexual depravity it did not glorify or recommend that depravity […] Cronenberg described the UK press reaction as ‘completely insane.’ Ballard is reported to have been bemused and outraged by the press reaction: ‘Half of America used to be conceived in the back of cars. There’s nothing revolutionary in the idea that there is a sexual component to our idea of, or by our excitement by, car crashes’” (2005:89).

Ballard’s contribution to a literature of the transgressive is explained in an interview with Jeremy Lewis: “You certainly trace this idea of exercising the perverse and deviant in the imagination in all your fiction. This leads to a Nietzschean sense of a new morality and a sense of freedom. These people you’ve cited as influences — Celine, Burroughs and Genet — were doing the same. Ballard — That’s true. There is a sense in which a ‘new morality’ (if you would like to call it that) has already started to emerge. People accept moral discontinuities in their lives in a way that older generations would not have done” (1991:7). Thus, for Ballard an exploration of the transgressive remains important, for as culture and subjectivity continue to evolve, so does morality.

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Evoking Foucault’s Discipline and Punish Crawford indicates the extent of the self-regulation of the contemporary subject, and intimates Ballard’s possible rationale for producing this text: “‘The Residencia Costasol is just a prison, just as much as Zarzuella jail. We’re building prisons all over the world and calling them luxury condos. The amazing thing is that the keys are on the inside. I can help people to snap the locks and step out into real air again. Think, Charles — if it works you can write a book about it, a warning to the rest of the world.’” “The kind of warning no one is keen to hear”” (1997:220).

Crawford takes Charles to the Residencia Costasol on a reconnaissance mission to prepare for his transgressive invasion: “‘The residents, two middle-aged men and a woman in her thirties, sat in the silent room, their faces lit by the trembling glow of a television screen. No expression touched their eyes, as if the dim shadows on the hessian walls around them had long become a satisfactory substitute for thought. ‘They’re watching TV with the sound turned down,’ I told Crawford as we strolled along the terrace, past similar groups isolated in their capsules. ‘What happened to them? They’re like a race from some dark planet who find the light there too strong to bear.’ ‘They’re refugees from time, Charles. Look around you — there are no clocks anywhere and almost no one wears a wristwatch.’ ‘Refugees? Yes … in some ways this place reminds me of the third world […]’

‘It’s the fourth world, Charles. The one waiting to take over everything’”” (1997:215)

In time-honoured tradition Crawford, the psychopath, takes great pleasure in articulating his vision of the future to Charles: “‘Leisure societies lie ahead at us, like those you see on the coast. People will still work — or, rather, some people will work, but only for a decade of their lives. They will retire in their late thirties, with fifty years of idleness in front of them.’ ‘A billion balconies facing the sun. Still it means a final goodbye to wars and ideologies.’ ‘But how do you energize people, give them some sense of community? A world lying on its back is open to any cunning predator? Politics are a pastime for a professional caste and fail to excite the rest of us. Religious belief demands a vast effort of imagination and emotional commitment, difficult if you are still groggy from last night’s sleeping pill. One thing is left which can rouse people, threaten them directly and force them to act together.’

‘Crime?’ ‘Crime and transgressive behaviour — by which I mean all activities that aren’t necessarily illegal, but provoke us and tap our need for strong emotion, quicken the nervous system and jump the synapses deadened by leisure and inaction’”” (1997:180). And of course Crawford represents that cunning predator!

Ballard humorously indicates the apparent disparity between the criminal act and creativity: “‘Does one follow the other? I don’t believe it. If someone burgles my house, shoots the dog and rapes the maid my reaction isn’t to open an art gallery.’ ‘Not your first reaction, perhaps. But later, as you question events and the world around you … the arts and criminality have always flourished side by side.’”” (1997:181).

The questionably limitless nature of his attack on the dominant social order is explained by Crawford: “‘The future has landed, Charles, the nightmare is already being dreamed. I believe in people, and know they deserve better.’ ‘You’ll bring them back to life — with amateur porn-films, burglary and cocaine?’ ‘They’re just the means. People are so hung up about sex and property and self-control. I am not talking about crime in the sense that Cabrera thinks of it. I mean anything that breaks the rules, sidesteps the social taboos’”” (1997:245).
Although *The Rules of Attraction* has been recently adapted as a movie.

Elizabeth Young outlines these events in ‘The Beast in the Jungle, the Figure in the Carpet,’ explaining that: ‘Bret Easton Ellis started making notes for his third novel, which he intended to be the monologue of a serial killer, whilst still working on the proofs of *The Rules of Attraction.* The publishing house Simon & Schuster offer a $300,000 advance for the book only to withdraw from publication in the autumn of 1990 after some exceptionally violent, gory excerpts appear in *Spy* and *Time* magazine’ (1992:132).

Carl Tighe goes on to explain that just prior to publishing: “At this stage nobody seems to have objected to the violence or misogyny. However in the autumn of 1990, just four weeks before it was due for distribution to bookshops, information was leaked to the press that the publisher had decided not to go ahead with publication. The rumour was that in-house editors found the book so offensive and misogynistic they simply refused to work on it. Ellis has always claimed that the book is about ‘a larger metaphor — alienation, pain, America, the overall tone of the culture’” (2005:104).

The disparate reception of *American Psycho* was intense as seen with these reviews in ‘Volume 117’ of *Contemporary Literary Criticism:* “In a review of *American Psycho,* Alberto Manguel suggests that the book produces ‘a revulsion not of the senses but of the gut, like that produced by shoving a finger down one’s throat.’ Norman Mailer, a writer similarly known for vivid descriptions of brutality, finds it difficult to defend Ellis’s approach to writing, due to its apparent lack of moral purpose. Nevertheless, defenders of Ellis’s work abound. Gore Vidal feels *American Psycho* is ‘a wonderfully comic novel,’ and other positive critical commentary centers on the metaphorical dimension that was missed by those who, compelled to act on the outrage the work provokes, are quick to ban and censor the book. *American Psycho* is seen by these defenders as an indictment of unprincipled materialistic consumerism” (Hunter *et al* eds.; 1999:105).

“It’s called California classic cuisine,’ Anne tells me, leaning in close, after we ordered. The statement deserves a reaction, I suppose, and since Scott and Courtney are discussing the merits of the *Post’s* gossip column, it’s up to me to reply. ‘You mean compared to say, California Cuisine?’ I ask carefully, measuring each word, then lamely add, ‘Or post-California cuisine?’ ‘I mean I know it sounds terribly trendy but there is a world of difference. It’s subtle,’ she says, ‘but it’s there.’ ‘I’ve heard of post-California cuisine,’ I say, acutely aware of the design of the restaurant: the exposed pipe and the columns and the open pizza kitchen and the … deck chairs. ‘In fact I’ve eaten it. No baby vegetables? Scallops in burritos? Wasabi crackers? Am I on the right track? […]’ ‘Exactly,’ Anne says. ‘Oh Courtney where did you find Patrick? He’s so knowledgeable about these things’” (1991:94-5).

Young expands on this apparent lack of content: “The publication of Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* in 1991 was replete with ironies. It seemed as if the world had decided to add to the book all the old-fashioned fictional qualities that it so conspicuously lacked: melodrama, plot, characterization, irony, hubris. The story of the book — its publication history, its author, its controversial aspects, its fashionable — had to stand in for the lack of story in the book which no one seemed to bother to read in any detail” (1992:132).

This becomes apparent when Patrick has dinner with Bethany, an old girlfriend from his College days: “And you’re at … P & P?” she asks. ‘Yes,’ I say. She nods, pauses, wants to say something, debates whether she should, then asks, all in a manner of seconds: ‘But doesn’t your family own —’ ‘I don’t want to talk about this,’ I say, cutting her off. ‘But yes, Bethany. Yes.’ ‘And you still work at P & P?’ she asks. Each syllable is spaced so that it bursts into my head. ‘Yes,’ I say, looking furtively around the room. ‘But—‘ She’s confused. Didn’t your father—’ ‘Yes, of course,’ I say, interrupting. ‘Have you had the focaccia at Pooncakes?’” (1991:237).

This is true for Young who explains that: “The all-prevailing kenosis of his previous work — the evacuation of content, the numbing-out of feeling and sense — together with his interest in social trends, and his expressed belief that only the most extreme and disruptive images of experience can penetrate the bland vacuity of his generation seem to make the combination of serial killer and the yuppie meritocracy of eighties New York and obvious choice of subject” (1992:135). And also by Tighe: “At first the gruesome nature of the killings […] dominate the way the book was received, […] We can now see the book very clearly as a satire on the coke-fuelled hedonistic money culture — on both sides of the Atlantic — of the Regan-Thatcher years” (2005:105).

Apart from the numerous times Patrick is mistaken for Marcus Halberstam by Paul Owen, these misrecognitions are plentiful and reach a crescendo toward the end of the novel: “I’ve already bumped into Robert Ailes from First Boston in the Horror aisle, or at least I think it was Robert Ailes […] He mumbled ‘Hello MacDonald,’ as he passed me by holding a copy of *Friday the 13th: Part 7* and a
documentary about abortions” (1991:111-12): “Hey, Williams” (127): “‘So how were the Bahamas?’ I ask after we order. ‘You just got back right?’ ‘Well, Taylor,’ Armstrong begins, staring at a point somewhere behind me and lightly above my head” (137): “Hey Simpson” and “See you at Fluties” (141): “I trip out into the street bumping into Charles Murphy from Kidder Peabody or could it be Bruce Barker from Morgan Stanley, whoever, and he says ‘Hey, Kinsley’ and I belch into his face, my eyes rolling back into my head, greenish bile dripping in strings from my bared fangs, and he suggests, unfazed, ‘See you at Fluties, okay?’” (151): “Hey Davis” (179): “‘Hey McCloy,’ Petersen says” (182): “Someone else, Frederick Dibble, stops by and congratulates me on the Larson account and then has the nerve to say, ‘Talk to you later, Saul’” (262).

28 The clearest narrative slip comes in the hyperreal car chase shoot-out between Bateman and the Police: “racing blindly down Greenwich I loose control entirely, the cab swerves into a Korean deli, next to a karaoke restaurant called the Lotus Blossom I’ve been to with Japanese clients, the cab rolling over fruit stands, smashing through a wall of glass, the body of the cashier thudding across the hood, Patrick tries to put the cab in reverse but nothing happens, he staggers out of the cab, leaning against it, a nerve-racking silence follows, “nice going Bateman,” he mutters, limp out of the store” (1991:349).

29 Most humorously noted when Bateman is asked what he does for a living and replies ‘Murders and decapitations,’ which is interpreted correctly, we assume, as ‘Mergers and Acquisitions.'

30 Young expands on the inherent moralism in American Psycho explaining that: “Ellis might be very critical of his culture, his text may be an experimentation in many ways but he comes from deep within that culture and cannot be said to pose anything of an anarchic threat to it. The faults Ellis perceives in contemporary culture come from an old-fashioned, straightforwardly moralistic reading of it. His book presents terrible amoral deviations, which, if rectified, would restore to society all the moral values it has lost and would revive a more wholesome dominant culture” (1992:145).

31 Please refer to the chapter entitled ‘End of the 1980s’ which is replete with the question of identity, and the narrative of subjectivity such as the following:

32 However, true to the possible sub-text of Bateman’s schizophrenia, the atemporal nature of the narrative, or perhaps even Ellis’ own revulsion toward happy endings, we soon find things returning to normal when Patrick explains that: “There’s no use denying it: this has been a bad week. I’ve started drinking my own urine. I laugh spontaneously at nothing. Sometimes I sleep under my futon” (1991:382). And once again we are left questioning the temporal linearity of the narrative, Patrick Bateman’s reliability as a narrator, or even if this event follows or pre-dates this hopeful epiphany.
Chapter 6
On Not Concluding —
The Diminished Subject, The Metaphysics of Comfort,
The Narrative of Self and Michel Foucault

6.1.a. An Ending By Way of A Re-Introduction

[I]f indeed there really is no world (to speak of) apart from language, then there really isn’t much reason to become distraught over the alleged fact that we can never get it quite right. From this perspective, in other words, there is nothing to ‘get;’ there is only language itself, discourse, texts, ‘social constructions’ of the world, nothing more. The absence of the possibility of getting it right is thus understood not so much as impossibility — a failure, a stopping short — as non-possibility: language, rather than referring to the world ‘in itself,’ refers only to language […] Again, except for preverbal children and a few other unfortunates, has anyone ever beheld an ‘unlanguaged’ world, a pure and pristine presence, untouched by words, untouched by social institutions, issuing from the specific surrounds in which we live? The answer, many would say, is surely ‘No.’ So why be angst-ridden? Why mourn the absence of what isn’t there? Why not just speak and write and try to make things interesting?
— Mark Freeman, in Rewriting the Self: History, Memory, Narrative (1993:10-11).

They cannot bear (and one cannot but sympathize) to hear someone saying: ‘Discourse is not life: its time is not your time; in it, you will not be reconciled to death; you may have killed God beneath the weight of all that you have said; but do not imagine that, with all that you are saying, you will make a man that will live longer than he.’
— Michel Foucault, in The Uses of Pleasure (1983:211).

Unlike the indeterminable nature of the condition of the possibility of change that continually shapes philosophy, literature and subjectivity, due to unavoidable yet practical dictates, it is necessary that I end the continuation of this atemporal teleology of the a priori diminished subject, and dictate a finality of sorts. However, in keeping with the aporia of the meaninglessness of existence and the failure of philosophical discourse to deterministically posit a raison d’être for the subject, or to provide the metaphysical comfort of self-presence — in order to transcend the inevitable terminus that is our fundamental corporeality — I shall resist the time-honoured tradition, and arrogant temptation, to carry out my own textual metaphysics in the form of a conclusion. In a thesis replete with the many pitfalls of metaphysics and the dangers of
determinism, to map this nomenclature onto this discussion of the diminished subject would be remiss for, as I shall explain, rather than viewing contemporary subjectivity as simply suffering from a crisis of the loss of a previous available transcendent self-presence, it is my contention that this is an ineluctable crisis — or as Nietzsche would put it an ‘eternal recurrence’ — of the recognition of the meaninglessness of being, and the repeated failure of religion and philosophy to provide the metaphysics of comfort which has traditionally assuaged the terror of existence.

Within this text, as with all discourses, there are inclusions and exclusions, there are necessary and more readily recognised subjective choices made when producing a text, and there are limits in scope and form depending on the type of work one undertakes. In producing this particular text my choices have dictated the inclusion of a cross section of twentieth century continental philosophy, a precise selection of several contemporary Anglo-American works of fiction — all written in English — and which exemplify my proposal of an ineluctably diminished nature of subjectivity, and all in order to mount an opposition to the proposition of a temporally specific, nay, ‘postmodern crisis’ of subjectivity. To many, certain absences may appear glaringly unforgivable: such as the omissions of Kant and Hegel and their patent importance those theorist who did gain admission to this text: the work of Saussure, Barthes, Deleuze and Guattari, that could easily have found a comfortable niche in the body of this text, rather than being implied in the margins: likewise, the theory and fiction of Søren Kierkegaard and Simone de Beauvoir would not be out of place: and neither would the eagerly consumed and researched, yet absent, fiction of Martin Amis, Will Self, Paul Auster, David Foster-Wallace, and not least of all Dennis Cooper. However, one noticeable absence will now be redressed as I turn my attention to the notable French theoretician Michel Foucault and the manner in which his philosophical lifework
makes for a fitting finale to this discussion of the diminished subject, contemporary literature, and the eternal recurrence of the crisis of philosophy.

What follows, therefore, is not a conclusion in the strict sense, but rather an ending. Yet within it there is implied a need to continue exploring the key propositions rhythmically reiterated throughout this text. By introducing Michel Foucault somewhat belatedly in this text there is, as one would expect, a method, for I propose to carry out a reading of his life and texts in the form of a summary, and as an example par excellence of the key issues of this thesis. That is, in discussing Foucault I will argue that despite my seemingly negative atemporal teleology of the repeated failure of philosophy, it still remains an important locus for the discussion of contemporary culture, and that the continued exploration of counter-discursive expressions of subjectivity — as explored in both my philosophical and literary sections — must necessarily restrain temerity and exercise caution.

6.2.a. Michel Foucault — A Narrative of a Philosophical Life

As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end. If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared, if some event of which we can at the moment do no more than sense the possibility — without knowing either what its form will be or what it promises — were to cause them to crumble, as the ground of Classical thought did, at the end of the eighteenth century, then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea.

— Michel Foucault, in The Order of Things (1966:387).

If one writer of recent times best exemplifies a theoretical perspective of the human subject as always already diminished and lacking metaphysical comfort due to an ineluctably unobtainable sense of self-presence, it is Michel Foucault. Although initially associated with the Structuralist movement and such luminaries as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Louis Althusser and Jacques Lacan, Foucault’s texts are difficult to categorise. Indeed, the keen student of his work will find themselves both mentally and physically challenged due to the disparate locations— and generic classifications — his
texts occupy in any given library, finding them listed variously under Law, Philosophy, History, Psychiatry, Medicine and Gender Studies, among many — something that both frustrates and gives insight into this seemingly obtuse writer. Furthermore, despite his initial impersonal macro-level investigations into the arbitrary nature of social discourses — while recognising the tangible effects on marginalised individuals such as the criminally insane — and by defamiliarising the seemingly a priori nature of power by implicating all subjects in the self-regulation of behaviour through the interpellation of systems of societal control — Foucault’s later work represented a more personal micro-level investigation into the sexual subject, which many have argued mirrored his political and philosophical attempts to effect tangible personal change at both a conscious and corporeal level. As such, what follows is a re-reading of his key texts and various accounts of the controversial philosophical life of Michel Foucault.

6.2.b. Michel Foucault, Discourse and The Diminished Subject

One need not dig deep to unearth the diverse influences in Foucault’s numerous texts, including a fascination with Nietzsche’s Dionysian subject embracing the suffering of existence, and the ‘death of god:’ the Structural linguistic of Saussure and his concepts of ‘langue’ and ‘parole’ and the division of language into ‘sign, signifier and signified:’ the proto-poststructuralist musings of Barthes, and especially the ‘Death of the Author’ and ‘From Work to Text:’ an almost unacknowledged interest in the work of the then theoretical pariah Heidegger: and his rejection of the increasingly deterministic work of Sartre. However, like those before him, Foucault’s determination to avoid the trap of metaphysics, and highlight the manner in which individual behaviour is subject to arbitrary discourses of power — coupled with the failure of traditional philosophy to effect any tangible alternatives — led him to carry out his own singular investigations into various hegemonic restraints placed on the subject. In keeping with his determinedly anti-deterministic position, rather than affiliating himself with an existing
philosophical movement, Foucault set about establishing a unique method for
defamiliarising the discursive rules and regulations which impact on our everyday lives,
which varied between his earlier ‘archeological,’ and a later ‘genealogical’ approaches
that represent more than a passing nod to Nietzsche. He explains his genealogical
approach in ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History’ indicating that: “If genealogy in its own
right gives rise to questions concerning our native land, native language, or the laws that
govern us, its intention is to reveal the heterogeneous systems which, masked by the
self, inhibit the formation of any form of identity” (1986:95). That is, rather than
viewing various institutions and discourses which guide, punish, educate and care for
the individual as necessarily altruistic and a priori, Foucault set about investigating the
historical basis of these controlling discourses, searching for discontinuities and
exclusions rather than origins, and implicated the individual in the legitimation and
continuation of these arbitrary discourses, rather than positing a singular seat of power
which — like the Bastille or the Winter Palace — could be stormed in a revolution to
emancipate the oppressed subject.

With his proclamation of the ‘death of man’ Foucault not only drew wide
criticism for his supposedly anti-humanist position, he vividly exposed the lack of the
metaphysics of presence by highlighting the a priori nature of the diminished subject,
and the impossibility of the subject ever achieving transcendence while remaining
engaged with those discourses that constrain it. In The Order of Things he argues that:

From within language experienced and traversed as language, in the play of its
possibilities extended to their furthest point, what emerges is that man has ‘come to
an end,’ and that, by reaching the summit of all possible speech, he arrives not at the
very heart of himself but at the brink of that which limits him; in that region where
death prowls, where thought is extinguished, where the promise of the origin

That is, the primacy of the self-present individual of the cogito has been undermined by
the necessary relationship between subject and language. If, as Foucault argues, various
unquestioned cultural, religious, political, judicial and medical discourses are brought
into question by the discontinuities that pick at the seemingly seamless teleology of the
history that legitimates them, then the concept of the self-present subject, or ‘man,’ is
terminally undermined.

However, the subject is not simply diminished in relation to a tangible former
sense of self, it is always already diminished in relation to a metaphysical ideal,
something supported by Foucault’s theoretical approach and seen further in ‘Nietzsche,
Genealogy, History,’ wherein he argues that: “The purpose of history, guided by
genealogy, is not to discover the roots of our identity, but to commit itself to its
dissipation. It does not seek to define our unique threshold of emergence, the homeland
to which metaphysicians promise a return; it seeks to make visible all of those
discontinuities that cross us” (1986:95). Thus, we can read Foucault’s work as an
example par excellence of the anti-metaphysician highlighting the a priori aporia of the
meaninglessness of existence, for although he undermines the metaphysical comfort of
the self-present subject, he optimistically proposes that by virtue of its discursive nature
there is always already implied the condition of the possibility of change.

6.2.c. The Failure of Philosophy — Sartre, Politics, Fascism and Terrorism

Having carried out my own subjective ‘genealogy’ of the recurrent failure of
philosophy, the trap of metaphysics, and the dangers of determinism, it is unsurprising
that Foucault would also attempt to address this perceived ‘crisis’ of theory and
subjectivity. He expresses his hopes, and doubts, for the future of philosophical
discourse as a useful manner of defamiliarising subjectivity in The Uses of Pleasure —
published just before his death — explaining that: “The ‘essay’ — which should be
understood as the assay or test by which, in the game of truth, one undergoes changes,
and not the simplistic appropriation of others for the purpose of communication — is
the living substance of philosophy, at least if we assume that philosophy is still what it
was in past times, i.e., an ‘ascesis,’ […] an exercise of oneself in the activity of thought”
Thus, it is possible to propose that even in his last days Foucault still believed in the positive potential of philosophical investigations into subjectivity — at both the macro and micro levels — something understandable if one considers his lifelong dedication to this activity. Furthermore, it also indicates the recurrence of doubt as to the validity of any philosophical work, the potential need for catharsis and comfort on the part of the theoretician, and a fundamental need for a belief in something positive. In his text *Foucault*, Gilles Deleuze supports this perspective of doubt and revisionism, discussing Foucault’s readiness to critically discuss his work in a variety of forums, indicating that:

*If Foucault’s interviews form an integral part of his work,* it is because they extend the historical problematization of each of his books into the construction of the present problem, be it madness, punishment or sexuality. What are the new types of struggle, which are transversal and immediate rather than centralized and mediatized? What are the ‘intellectual’s’ new functions, which are specific or ‘particular’ rather than universal? What are the new modes of subjectivation, which tend to have no identity? This is the present triple root of the questions: *What can I do, What do I know, What am I?* (1988:115).

Thus, we clearly see the issue of subjectivity transgressing the purely theoretical and isolated world of academia, and entering — just as Foucault would have wanted — various popular discourses, although this is not uncommon in Continental Europe. Furthermore, in true anti-deterministic fashion, Foucault’s doubts led him to search for the discontinuities in his own works, to redevelop and modify his ideas according to societal changes, to postulate rather than dictate, but at all times to question the role of the philosopher and to strive to understand the controls and constraints placed on the individual, for the good of philosophy and — one could argue — for his own sense of well-being, and not without good reason.

Foucault’s ‘particular’ problem with the ‘universal’ role of the intellectual is a further example of a stringent anti-metaphysical position, and elucidates yet another of his major concerns. Having already discussed at length the vitriolic conflict that erupted between Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, it should come as no surprise that
Foucault’s perceived failure of philosophy should be influenced by the intellectual determinism exhibited by the rampant left-wing Sartre during his ‘political turn.’ In his biography *The Lives of Michel Foucault*, David Macey explains how Foucault — as the predominant French intellectual of his day — had to be persuaded by Daniel Defert, his homosexual partner, to attend the funeral of possibly the most famous French philosopher of all time:

When Defert asked him if he would be going to the funeral, he replied: ‘Why should I? I don’t owe him anything,’ before capitulating in the face of the argument that Sartre had, in political an international terms, been the prototypical French intellectual of the post-war period. In the event, he found the experience moving. As they moved slowly through the streets, Foucault spoke to Von Bülow [a former student] of his youth and of the ‘intellectual terrorism’ then exercised by Sartre and those around him (1993:429).

Thus, it appears that Foucault was of the opinion that Sartre had abused his extensive intellectual capital by arguing a totalitarian perspective of left-wing politics and philosophy in a deterministic fashion bordering on ‘terrorism,’ something seen with his — and those *Le Temps Modernes* — treatment of Camus’ metaphysically optimistic text *The Rebel*. James Miller’s biography *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, expands on this point stating that during the funeral Foucault explained to Von Bülow that: “‘it was him, and all that he represented … that I wished to renounce.’ Sartre’s impact he summed up in a word: ‘terrorism’” (1994:38). Therefore, we can assume that while Foucault’s anti-metaphysical position was greatly influenced by Nietzsche, it had a lot to ‘thank’ Sartre’s totalitarian postulations for, and can be seen as a result of the failure of the latter to achieve the metaphysics of comfort, and certitude of subjectivity he was clearly obsessed with.

Having lived through the horrors of WWII, that Foucault should view Sartre’s metaphysical political posturing as a determinism that had much in common with — yet obviously fell short of — the terror of Nazi fascism is hardly surprising, and indicates his own determinedly anti-deterministic perspective. Furthermore, the repeated failure
of Sartre’s many and varied attempts to posit a possible expression of subjectivity free from the nihilistic terror of existence, would have added to his own doubts over the validity, and usefulness, of philosophical discourse to effect any useful change. Foucault expresses this view in his article ‘Truth and Power,’ wherein he makes veiled reference to Sartre and his own hopes for a tangible outcome for philosophy:

For a long period, the ‘left’ intellectual spoke and was acknowledged the right of speaking in the capacity of master of truth and justice. He was heard, or purported to make himself heard, as the spokesman of the universal. To be an intellectual meant something like being the consciousness/conscience of us all. I think we have here an idea transposed from Marxism, from a faded Marxism indeed […] Some years have now passed since the intellectual was called upon to play this role. A new mode of the ‘connection between theory and practice’ has been established. Intellectuals have got used to working, not in the modality of the ‘universal,’ the ‘exemplary,’ the ‘just-and-true-for all,’ but within specific sectors, at the precise points where their own conditions of life or work situate them (housing, the hospital, the asylum, the laboratory, the university, family and sexual relations). This has undoubtedly given them a much more immediate and concrete awareness of struggles (1980:126).

It takes little imagination to recognise this ‘left intellectual’ as Sartre, and to view his failings as Foucault’s impetus to strive for a philosophical position which — although always constrained by discursive practices — had something ‘concrete’ rather than metaphysical, to say about the ‘struggles’ of the subject against the scourge of totalitarianism, fascism and ‘terrorism’ — yet without recourse to its own reductive and potentially oppressive determinism. This optimistic view of the usefulness of philosophy is best expressed in The Uses of Pleasure, and famously read as his eulogy by Gilles Deleuze: “But, then, what is philosophy today — philosophical activity, I mean — if it is not critical work that thought brings to bear on itself? In what does it consist, if not the endeavor to know and to what extent it might be possible to think differently, instead of legitimating what is already known? There is always something ludicrous in philosophical discourse when it tries, from the outside, to dictate to others, to tell them where their truth is and how to find it, or when it works up a case against them in the language of naïve positivity” (1987:8-9). And on the particular ‘subject’ of Jean-Paul Sartre, enough said!
6.2.d. Foucault and Plato — The Literary Turn

In keeping with the rhythmical repetition of the themes of the crisis of philosophy and the usefulness of literature in the investigation of subjectivity throughout this thesis, it is understandable that given his own increased frustration with the metaphysics of philosophical discourse, that Foucault’s work should take a ‘literary turn.’ As previously seen with the literary interests of Nietzsche, Heidegger and Camus before him, Foucault was interested in fictional explorations of the lack of self-present certitude afforded the metaphysical subject of language, in a defamiliarised and deliberately metaphorical form, and the preeminence of value judgments that prioritise the reason and rhetoric of philosophical discourse, over the unreason of the poetic. Given his interest in defamiliarising the seemingly a priori discourses of everyday subjectivity, the traditional division attributed to Plato’s ‘wrong turn’ — that which prioritised one arbitrary representation of subjectivity over another — was in need of questioning. He makes this apparent in ‘The Order of Discourse,’ explaining that:

There is no doubt that this division is historically constituted. For the Greek poets of the sixth century BC, the true discourse […] which inspired respect and terror, and to which one had to submit because it ruled, was the one pronounced by men who spoke as of right and according to the required ritual; the discourse which dispensed justice and gave everyone his share; the discourse which in prophesying the future not only announced what was going to happen but helped to make it happen, carrying men’s minds along with it and thus weaving itself into the fabric of destiny […] Between Hesiod and Plato a certain division was established, separating true discourse from false discourse: a new division because henceforth the true discourse is no longer precious and desirable, since it is no longer the one linked to the exercise of power. The sophist is banished. This historical division probably gave our will to know its general form. However, it has never stopped shifting (1981:54).

That is, the age-old predominance of the rhetorical over the poetical is revealed as nothing more than the valourising of one particular discursive practice over another, that at once condemns the metaphorical postulations of the poetic as fallacious, specious and dangerous, while legitimating an equally sophistic mode of control. Yet, despite the tradition of this arbitrary division of discourses, Foucault’s genealogical investigation
into discursive practices, resists the hopeless nihilism of the terror of existence — as seen with Sartre’s existentialism — and implies an anti-deterministic view of the immutability of these discourses, arguing for a lack of intransigence of the ‘will to know,’ and in turn the condition of the possibility of change.

An important aspect of Foucault’s genealogical investigation into the discourse of insanity — seen in *Madness and Civilization* and *Discipline and Punish* — stems from the potential subversive possibilities of those dangerous individuals exploring the freedom of ‘ungrounded languages,’ as seen with the lunatic and the schizophrenic, and the actions of the criminally insane. However, given the severely limiting treatment of these individuals, Foucault began to view the transgressive possibilities of these counter-discursive activities — and explorations of potential alternative forms of fictional subjectivity — as best exemplified in the ‘new literature’ of such modernist writers as Artaud, Bataille and Kafka, arguing in *The Order of Things* that:

It was inevitable that this new mode of being of literature should have been revealed in works like those of Artaud or Roussel — and by men like them; in Artaud’s work, language, having been rejected as discourse and re-apprehended in the plastic violence of the shock, is referred back to the cry, to the tortured body, to the materiality of thought, to the flesh; in Roussel’s work, language having been reduced to powder by a systematically fabricated chance, recounts interminably the reception of death and the enigma of divided origins. And as if this experiencing of the forms of finitude in language were insupportable, or inadequate […] it is within madness that it manifested itself — the figure of finitude thus positing itself in language (as that which unveils itself within it), but also before it, preceding it, as that formless, mute, unsignifying region where language can find its freedom. And it is indeed in this space thus revealed that literature, first with surrealism (though still in a very much disguised form), then, more and more purely, with Kafka, Bataille, and Blanchot, posited itself as experience: as experience of death (and in the element of death), of unthinkable thought (and in its inaccessible presence), of repetition […] as experience of finitude (trapped in the opening and the tyranny of that finitude) (1966:383-84).

That is, for Foucault these works defamiliarised language and being, and in doing so the apparent *a priori* and restrictive nature of all discourses, bringing with them the possibility of alternative ‘ungrounded’ forms of subjectivity. Therefore, these texts attempt to express the language of those individuals marginalised, oppressed and
considered dangerous by those hegemonic structures — enabling the legitimation and continuation of the metaphysical discourses which ply a hucksters tale of freedom and self-presence to those subjects who unwittingly interpellate them as a priori — yet with certain exceptions, such as American Psycho, most are ignored due to their lowly status as fallacious fiction.

However, Foucault soon became disenchanted with the transgressive possibilities of literature, as the rise of the Structuralist movement — and literary practices espoused by those at the journal Tel Quel — led to new a form of determinism whereby a narrow selection of ‘valid’ texts became the legitimate object for the philosophical investigation of subjectivity. As David Macey explains when discussing the posthumously published ‘Foucault, passe-frontières de la philosophy’ — the sole result of a proposed series of interviews between Foucault and Roger-Pol Droit called off due to their close approximation to an autobiography — Foucault was dismissive of:

[T]he argument, elaborated by Tel Quel and other groups, that the act of writing itself was subversive, and that as it became increasingly self-reflexive, it became increasingly revolutionary. Speaking in the past tense, he once more described how Bataille, Blanchot and Klossowski had, like Nietzsche, represented an escape from the constricting discourse of philosophy, in an area in which philosophy became permeable to other forms of thought and language. The tone is valedictory, almost rueful. For a moment, Foucault was more interested in the question of how academic and avant-garde discourses effectively collude in defining some texts ‘literary,’ or promote them to ‘literary’ status. In the published fragment, he offers no solution (1993:340).

Thus, we see again the scourge of deterministic discourses embracing, classifying and subsuming that, which for Foucault at least, was potentially counter-discursive, in much the same way as Sartre’s value judgments of ‘committed’ writing did in What is Literature? At the end of his ‘literary turn, therefore, we see Foucault reach an aporia and become ‘committed’ to a more immediate and personal micro-level approach to the investigation of alternative subjectivities. Therefore, the failure to adequately rectify the division between literature and philosophy — and with questionable subjective value judgments placed on the legitimacy of revolutionary texts based solely on predominant
political and philosophical discourses that legitimate and perpetuate subjective positions — led to a deterministic perspective of literature fueling arguments, such as Fredric Jameson’s, that anything less than ‘committed’ contemporary writing was automatically postmodern and nihilistic. While such choices are inevitably subjective and political, for any ‘intellectual’ to argue ‘universally’ which texts fulfill their specific criteria was anathema to Foucault — who viewed such determinism as totalitarian and potentially fascistic — and thus undermined the potentially cathartic possibilities of literature to express possible future narratives of subjectivity.

6.2.e. The Indeterminable Subject — A Counter-Discursive Narrative of Foucault

Given Foucault’s anti-metaphysical perspective of the impossibility of attaining pure self-presence due to the discursively ‘authored’ nature of subjectivity, observations that his life and work appear deliberately indeterminable are many, and fit well with my own discussion of the a priori aporia of the diminished subject.4 Because Foucault resisted all efforts to write his biography — as seen with his rejection Roger-Pol Droit’s proposed book of interviews — all insights into his personal life are limited due to the posthumous destruction of his notebooks and letters at his behest, something understandable given his patent passion for Nietzsche’s work. The view that Foucault recognised the metaphysical nature of subjectivity and deliberately resisted any attempts to posit his life and texts in deterministic terms, is supported by Miller who — when attempting to do just that — indicates the ironic nature of his pursuit:

Consider, for example, the dilemma of trying to write a narrative account of someone who questioned, repeatedly and systematically, the value of old-fashioned ideas about the ‘author;’ someone who raised the gravest of doubts about the character of personal identity as such; someone who, as a matter of temperament, distrusted prying questions and naked honesty; someone, finally, who was nevertheless inclined to see his own work as, on some level, autobiographical (1994:6).

That is, we can posit that the lack of certitude regarding Michel Foucault the subject is an implicit aspect of his theoretical explorations that repeatedly resist the imposition of
metaphysical discourses. However, it is also possible — given the failure of the possibility of a ‘committed’ literature — that Foucault’s work was in fact a cathartic exercise, and provides greater insights into his response to the terror of the meaninglessness of existence, for as he explains: “That’s the obscure desire of a person who writes. It is true that the first text one writes is neither written for others, nor for who one is … There is an attempt at modifying one’s way of being through the act of writing” (Quoted in Miller:33). Thus, it is possible to read Foucault’s work as a semi-autobiographical attempt to ‘modify’ his subjectivity through the construction of texts that resist generic philosophical classifications, and by promoting a fragmented and changing personal and public persona.

With this view Foucault’s work can be read as the personal odyssey of a subject resisting limiting discourses by exploring the optimistic possibilities of a philosophical life, for as he explains: “The key to the personal poetic attitude of a philosopher is not to be sought in his ideas, as if it could be deduced from them, but rather in his philosophy-as-life, in his philosophical life, his ethos” (Quoted in Miller:9). In other words, Foucault’s response to the trap of metaphysics, and the failure of philosophical discourses to explore positive and tangible alternatives of subjectivity, was to live out his theoretical ideas, to put them into practice and test their validity, and that the difficulties faced when attempting to make conclusions regarding either his philosophy or life, reflect his proposition of the ‘death of man.’ David Macey supports the perspective that Foucault constructed a narrative of self that would problematise perceived notions of subject, author and art, explaining that:

The Sartrean theory of authenticity appeared to him to be a return of the idea of a true self. Prompted by his interviewers, Foucault agreed that his own view was much closer to Nietzsche’s contention that […] ‘One thing is needful — to ‘give style’ to one’s character — a great and rare art. It is practiced by those who survey all of the strengths and weakness of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and even weakness delights the eye … through long practice and daily work at it.’ The relationship of the self should, that is, be one of creative activity and not one designed to reveal a ‘true’ self (1993:458).
Thus, in Foucault we find a philosophe evoking Nietzsche by creating a narrative of self in order to undermine the primacy of the *cogito* and the possibility of the transcendence of self-presence. Rather, than creating a neat teleology of Michel Foucault the subject, both his life and work mimic the discontinuities of the condition of the possibility of change and the meaninglessness of everyday existence.\(^5\) However, despite this recognition there remains at the core of Foucault’s work a determination that given the metaphysical nature of the discursive subject, alternative expressions of subjectivity are always already a possibility.

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* we find the clearest indication that this counter-discursive and fragmented narrative of self was a deliberate attempt by Foucault to avoid the oppressive discourses of subjectivity, wherein he argues that:

What, do you imagine that I would take so much trouble and so much pleasure in writing, do you think that I would keep so persistently to my task, if I were not preparing — with a rather shaky hand — a labyrinth into which I can venture, in which I can move my discourse, opening up underground passages, forcing it to go far from itself, finding overhangs that reduce and deform its itinerary, in which I can lose myself and appear at last to eyes that I will never have to meet again. I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have no face. Do not ask me who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in or-der. At least spare us their morality when we write (1983:17).

That is, Foucault can be viewed as a philosopher who embraced Nietzsche’s view of the labyrinth, the ‘death of man’ and the terror of the meaninglessness of existence, yet optimistically determined to use his life and philosophical discourses to defamiliarise the seemingly *a priori* in order to explore, and promote, alternative counter-discursive narratives of self, while holding on to the belief that through the act of writing the individual could transcended the oppressive ‘moralties’ afflicting subjectivity.\(^6\)

6.2.f. A History of Sexuality — The Desexualised Subject and ‘Limit Experiences’

Having recognised that the discursive nature of subjectivity *ipso facto* implies the condition of the possibility of change, and given his own homosexuality, it is hardly
surprising that Foucault turned his genealogical attention to the defamiliarisation of sexual discourses. In *The History of Sexuality* he argued that rather than being repressed, “Our epoch has initiated sexual heterogeneities” (1987:37), whereby sexual diversity has been concertedly investigated leading to the establishment of such sexual discourses as ‘homosexuality’ and ‘paedophilia,’ by encouraging the individual to ‘confess’ to sexual ‘perversities’ and fantasies, explaining that:

[S]ince the end of the sixteenth century, the ‘putting into discourse of sex,’ far from undergoing a process of restriction, on the contrary has been subjected to a mechanism of increased incitement; that the techniques of power exercised over sex have not obeyed a principle of rigorous selection, but rather one of dissemination and implantation of polymorphous sexualities; and that the will to knowledge has not come to a halt in the face of a taboo that must not be lifted, but has persisted in constituting […] a science of sexuality (12-13).

That is, the desire for the ‘will to knowledge’ has been extended to the micro-level control of the subject, whereby the very future of the human race is being determined, and counter-discursive, perverse, dangerous and non-procreative sexual acts are classified, determined and mapped by a variety of discourses to ensure the continuation of political power, medical discourses and the legal system. Thus, human sexuality becomes a discourse of power and control over the most intimate aspects of subjectivity — rather than acting as the seat of rebellion — as the constant investigations by various hegemonic practices, such as religious, judicial, and even economic discourses — such as the pornography industry — reveal the private and taboo acts of the sexual individual. As Foucault explains: “Sex was a means of access both to the life of the body and the life of the species. It was employed as a standard for the disciplines and as a basis for regulations. This is why in the nineteenth century sexuality was sought out in the smallest details of individual existences; it was tracked down in behaviour, pursued in dreams; it was suspected of underlying the least follies, it was traced back to the earliest years of childhood; it became the stamp of individuality — at the same time what enabled one to analyze the latter and what made it possible to master it” (146).
Thus, while he argues that sexuality has not been repressed, and the plethora of diverse sexual practices appear to be the only real site of contestation for many subjects, Foucault indicates that the willingness of the individual to appropriate a generic sexual classification is always already restrictive and metaphysical.

Foucault’s response to these discursively repressive expressions of sexuality was to propose a new form of ‘desexualised individual’ that would explore the pleasures of the body extraneous to traditionally accepted sexual practices, and self-regulated behaviour, that legitimated and perpetuated hegemonic discourses. He elucidates this point further in *The History of Sexuality* arguing that:

“We must not think that by saying yes to sex, one says no to power; on the contrary, one tracks along the course laid out by the general deployment of sexuality. It is the agency of sex that we must break away from, if we aim — through a tactical reversal of the various mechanisms of sexuality — to counter the grips of power with the claims of bodies, pleasures, and knowledges, in their multiplicity and their possibility of resistance. The rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasure (157).”

Knowingly, in an interview carried out shortly before his death, Foucault acknowledges that he fell into the trap of determinism indicating that his ‘philosophy-as-life’ has become predominated by his personal explorations of homosexual practices and subcultures, stating that: “I believe that … someone who is a writer is not simply doing his work in his books […] but that his major work is, in the end, himself in the process of writing his books. The private life of an individual, his sexual preference, and his work are interrelated, not because his work translates his sexual life, but because the work includes the whole life as well as the text” (Quoted in Miller:19). While this position expresses Foucault’s belief in the cathartic possibilities of writing — and a deep-seated desire for the metaphysics of comfort in the belief that the subject can manage and manipulate their own narrative of self — the manner in which he transformed this philosophical proposition into actual experience raises various questions and concerns.
The locus for Foucault’s explorations of the ‘desexualised’ individual’s extreme ‘limit experience’ became apparent to him following his introduction to the gay bathhouses of San Francisco during his first visit to the US in the mid-1970s. It was here that Foucault’s search for pleasure reached it peak, as he explains in one of many interviews given to gay publications at the time: “I think that it is politically important [...] that sexuality is able to function as it functions in the bathhouses. You meet men there who are to you as you are to them: nothing more than a body with which combinations and productions of pleasure are possible. You cease to be imprisoned in your own face, in your own past, in your own identity” (1994:264). Thus for Foucault the counter-discursive exploration of desexualised physical pleasure that transcended the repressive discourses controlling sexuality, could be found in the Sado-Masochist activities practiced in these environments and — defending this problematic position — argued in the journal Gai Pied that:

The idea that S&M is related to deep violence, that S&M practice is a way of liberating this violence, this aggression is stupid. We know very well that what all those people are doing is not aggressive; they are inventing new possibilities of pleasure with strange parts of their body — through the eroticism of the body. I think it's a kind of creation, a creative enterprise, which has as one of its main features what I call the desexualisation of pleasure ... The possibility of using our bodies as a possible source of very numerous pleasures is something that is important. For instance, if you look at the traditional constructions of pleasure, you see that bodily pleasure, or pleasures of the flesh, are always drinking, eating and fucking. And that seems to be the limit of our understanding our body, our pleasures (Quoted in Macey:1993:369).

Thus we see Foucault attempt to transcend the discursively determining possibilities of sexuality by exploring the extent of bodily pleasure in the ‘ungrounded language’ of gay S&M practices, something that also including such deliberately asexual acts as ‘fist-fucking.’ While he acknowledged the controversy surrounding the apparent violence associated with such practices, it appears that as a member of this subculture Foucault fulfilled his own metaphysical desire to explore the alternative avenues of pleasure, and micro-level subjectivity, that he postulated in his texts. Thus, with his anonymous
search for pleasure among strangers, we see the world-famous philosopher determinedly undertaking an extreme exploration of subjectivity by becoming the faceless, and nameless, corporeal subject of pleasure.

6.2.g. Michel Foucault and The Condition of the Possibility of Change

Although we have seen Foucault resisting the determinist trap of metaphysics, there appears little doubt that his philosophical life-work was, in many ways, caught up in its own metaphysics of comfort as he continually strove to defamiliarise the seemingly *a priori* hegemonic discourses which construct and constrain the subject, in favour of the possible freedom of a counter-discursive presence of self. Given the recurrent failure of traditional philosophical and political dogmas to achieve alternative expressions of being, and the tendency for deterministic approaches to slip into totalitarianism and fascism, Foucault’s micro-level focus on the search for desexualised pleasure and his view of personal transcendence without the oppression of others appears — at least on the surface — a logical conclusion. This perspective of Foucault as driven with a ‘passion’ to find a personal outlet, or a philosophical outcome for subjectivity that would transcend the *a priori* aporia of the meaninglessness of existence, is explored in Miller’s *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, wherein he dramatically exclaims that:

Too much was at stake in Foucault’s ongoing exploration of ‘bodies and pleasure.’ Lured on by the most ‘insidious’ of lusts, curiosity — and convinced that the kind of curiosity that ‘enables one to get free of oneself’ even merited ‘the pain of being practised with a little obstinacy’ — Foucault remained desperately eager to unriddle the truth about himself. By discovering the truth, he might still be able to transfigure himself, and create ‘something that absolutely does not exist, about which we know nothing’ — a different kind of man with a different kind of soul, and a different kind of body, ‘utterly new, utterly beautiful.’ Of course there were dangers. One needed courage (1994:345).

Although Miller seems inordinately interested in the controversy surrounding Foucault’s exploration of ‘limit experiences’ in the S&M bathhouses of San Francisco, and his LSD experiences in Death Valley, there is a validity regarding the dangers associated with such physical explorations of alternative subjectivities. However, while
Miller’s perspective is retrospectively influenced by the knowledge that Foucault was to contract AIDS as a result of his philosophical lifework, my own view is that this particular ‘danger’ faced by the subject, is merely an extreme example of the ineluctable condition of the possibility of change. Despite the optimism he held for his pursuit, Foucault was not obverse to the possibilities of danger — seen with his disgust at the sudden death of Roland Barthes⁸ — as he explains in ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History:’ “Chance is not simply the drawing of lots, but raising the stakes in every attempt to master chance through the will to power, and giving rise to the risk of an even greater chance. The world we know is not this ultimately simple configuration where events are reduced to accentuate their essential traits, their final meaning, or their initial and final value. On the contrary, it is a profusion of entangled events” (1986:89). Thus, we see Foucault raise the stakes of his personal experience in order to effect change, and it is to the ‘profusion of tangled events’ both preceding and following his death that I shall turn my attention to next.

It is both ironic and unfortunate that Foucault’s new found locus for desexualised experience should be the first to be subject to the extreme condition of the possibility of change that is AIDS. That his investigations into ‘ungrounded languages’ and the purely corporeal nature of bodily pleasure, should become victim to a virulent and unforgiving virus that attacked the very corporeality of this potential new individual, can be viewed as the ultimate example of the impossibility of pure self-presence and of the a priori aporia of the diminished nature of subjectivity. However, what is most unfortunate is the controversial response to Foucault’s apparent reticence regarding his illness, and the possibility that he continued attending S&M bathhouses despite knowing he had contracted AIDS.⁹ While having no wish to add to the weight of discourse regarding this aspect of Foucault’s life and death, I would instead argue that his response to his illness could be viewed as a continuation of his philosophical lifework. While it remains
uncertain whether Foucault knew he had AIDS, it does merit consideration that this controversy is the result of a deliberate reticence on his part to maintain a personal ethos by refusing to discuss either his illness or the ‘ungrounded language’ of desexualised experience, for fear of it becoming subsumed by the oppressive discourses he was attempting to undermine.

The change effected by the spread of AIDS throughout San Francisco’s gay community is well documented by Miller who explains that: “Under these morbid circumstances, some resolved to change their sexual practices, embracing either a terrified celibacy or a new moderation, cutting down on sexual contacts and avoiding the exchange of bodily fluids. But others, feeling confused or resigned — or both — expressed a defiant abandon, partying on, as one censorious eyewitness would later remark, ‘like the revellers in Edgar Allen Poe’s ‘Masque of the Red Death’” (1994:28). Although the image of horror and decay associated with Poe’s macabre story makes for riveting reading, I am more inclined to view Foucault’s position as one of continued resistance to the discourses of power he had spent both his academic and personal life attempting to overturn, a perspective supported by Macey who explains that in a private interview given to Michael Horovitz — a student of Foucault’s — not long before his death he: “began talking of AIDS, and of looking to the authorities for lessons: doctors, the church. He is incensed that a group (gays) who have risked so much, are looking to standard authorities for guidance in a time of crisis. It is absurd. Unbelievable. ‘How can I be scared of AIDS when I could die in a car?’” (1993:463). Thus, for Foucault, the medical discourses, and safe sex practices, forced upon those exploring the ‘ungrounded languages’ of desexualised S&M pleasure, were ‘technologies of power’ that, by undertaking a greater understanding of AIDS, its mode of transmission, and dictating the behaviour of those at risk of contracting it, were oppressing his counter-discursive experience. And while it may seem sensible with hindsight that many would adopt a
low risk approach to their sexual behaviour — justified by the horrendous results of the spread of AIDS — it follows that Foucault would view this intrusion as anathema to his Dionysian embracement of the terror of existence. The extent of his reticence becomes apparent if we consider that if he was aware that he had contracted AIDS, and omitted to informed his lover, and political activist, Daniel Defert — and given the latter’s immediate formation of an internationally recognised AIDS awareness organisation upon his death — then it is possible that this lack of discourse was a somewhat justified final act of his philosophical life.¹¹

6.3.a. On Not Concluding But Continuing

The precept ‘to be concerned with oneself’ was, for the Greeks, one of the main principles of cities, one of the main rules for social and personal conduct and for the art of life. For us now this notion is rather obscure and faded. When one is asked ‘What is the most important moral principle in ancient philosophy?’ the immediate answer is not ‘Take care of oneself’ but the Delphic principle […] ‘know yourself’ meant ‘Do not suppose yourself to be a god.’

The critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.
— Michel Foucault, in ‘What is Enlightenment’ (1984:50).

In summation then, despite the exigencies which dictate that I end this discussion of the diminished subject — those relating to the metaphysics of submission — this chapter in no way represents a conclusion. And while feeling a certain reluctance to end this teleology I strongly urge, despite of the repeated failure of philosophical discourse to avoid the trap of metaphysics, for the continuation of such investigations into the discursive origins, and the repression of alternative expressions, of subjectivity. Given the widely accepted perspective of contemporary society as postmodern in nature, and of a temporally specific ‘crisis’ that has diminished the self-present individual of yester-year, this investigation into the ‘eternal recurrence’ of the crises of both philosophy and
subjectivity, clearly supports one major criticism of contemporary culture — and Fredric Jameson would be proud of me here — that we have lost our sense of history. However, unlike those calling for the return of the originality of art in the face of pastiche, and the purely self-present individual as opposed to the fragmented postmodern subject, I would argue that the contemporary being is in no way diminished in relation to a bygone transcendental individual, but is simply the latest manifestation of the eternal recurrence of the a priori aporia of the diminished subject. Thus, this text can be seen as a type of Foucauldian genealogy into the history of a continued crisis of subjectivity that, rather than searching for origins and solutions to this supposed problem, uncovers its precedents, and exposes the discontinuities in the journey that finds us arrive at our present ‘postmodern’ perspective. As Foucault explains, when discussing his reason for writing Discipline and Punish: “I would like to write the history of this prison, with all of the political investments of the body that it gathers together in its closed architecture. Why? Simply because I am interested in the past? No, if one means by that writing a history of the past in terms of the present. Yes, if one means writing the history of the present” (1991:30-31). With this in mind, this ‘historical’ investigation into the crisis of philosophy and subjectivity is essential if we are to continue defamiliarising the dominant cultural discourse of the ‘crisis’ of postmodernism, and the metaphysical lie that urges for the return of a misplaced pre-postmodern self-present individual.

It should be apparent by now that, despite the repeated failure of those attempting alleviate their own perceived crisis in theory and subjectivity as seen throughout this text, in no way do I prescribe the type of nihilism associated with Sartre’s existentialism, the tragic personal and political aporia of Heidegger, nor the negative, anything-goes attitude of much contemporary theory stemming from the misguided interpretation of Derridean deconstruction as ‘free-play.’ What would be closer to the
truth is to say that I feel a far greater affiliation with the naïve utopianism of Camus and his call for cautious rebellion in the face of determinism and totalitarianism, while arguing that if we are to overcome the terror of existence it is through an innate belief in the certitude of the metaphysics of comfort that is human happiness and joy. With this in mind, Foucault appears to have more in common with Camus than it would seem, for he also strove for a future subject free of deterministic and repressive discourses, and expressed his own need for metaphysical comfort through the exploration of desexualised pleasure. And in this respect I would turn to Foucault’s retrospective discussion of his philosophical life in *The Uses of Pleasure* wherein, and with great modesty, he states that:

The irony in those efforts one makes to alter one’s way of looking at things, to change the boundaries of what one knows and to venture out a ways from there. Did mine actually result in a different way of thinking? Perhaps at the most they made it possible to go back through what I was already thinking, to think it differently, and to see what I had done from a new vantage point in a clearer light (1987:11).

And while it may be presumptuous of me to suggest that I have achieved this in this text, perhaps all I can ask for at the micro-level is that this missive fulfills my own need for metaphysical comfort and a belief in the condition of the possibility of change — through my selective genealogy of these attempts to address the crises of subjectivity and philosophy — that inherently defamiliarises those hegemonic discourses that judge, and oppress, both personal and creative expressions of subjectivity.

That Michel Foucault’s philosophical lifework should be the focus of this final chapter is a deliberate attempt to highlight the need for caution when acting out one’s philosophical premises on a personal level. We have already seen the mistakes of Martin Heidegger, whose personal fears for the future of Germany following the First World War became confused with the misappropriation of Nietzsche’s work by the Nazi party, and of Sartre’s totalitarian perspective of Camus’ work from the position of the ‘universal intellectual.’ As such, without entering into a debate regarding Foucault’s
ethical position due to a lack of privileged insight into his thoughts and actions — and as seen with my discussion of the positive possibilities of controversial works of literature, such as *Cocaine Nights* and *American Psycho* — it seems that certain ideas and actions are best left unexplored in ‘real’ terms, given the potential dangers posed for both the individual and the Other by certain extreme ‘limit experiences.’ Despite his own deliberately non-deterministic anti-metaphysical approach to his life and work, in death Foucault was accused of a micro-level fascism, and of deliberately infecting other subjects with AIDS, while continuing his own desexualised search for pleasure despite discursive attempts to restrict these experiences and the possibility of a transcendent presence of self. However, this perspective is purely speculative and one needs to remember his famous ‘Preface’ to Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, in which he argues that:

>T]he major enemy, the strategic adversary is fascism […] And not only historical fascism, the fascism of Hitler and Mussolini — which was able to mobilize and use the desire of the masses so effectively — but also the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behaviour, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us (1996:xiii).

Given this patent fascination, yet repeated dislike of determinism and fascism, it seems unlikely that Foucault would have deliberately involved others in his personal Dionysian desire to ‘live dangerously,’ and perhaps instead chose to chance his life, to raise the stakes, and run the risk of the potential outcome of his own passionate need for the ‘will to truth.’

And it is with this perspective that I urge for the continuation of philosophical research despite its speculative failings, in order that it continue to monitor, and defamiliarise, the seemingly *a priori*, to search for the discontinuities in the discourses of power, to posit alternatives, and to bring a certain cathartic contentment that comes with the knowledge that such a pursuit is an expression of the need for the metaphysics of comfort in the face of the meaninglessness of existence. If this thesis simply adds to
the accumulation of knowledge, I hope that at the very least this investigation into the temporally disparate, yet repeated crises of subjectivity and philosophy, and the metaphysics of determinism, is understood as vehemently urging for a continued need to ‘rebel’ against the unfortunate tendency of totalitarian views to veer towards fundamentalism and fascism. Something that can manifest itself as the micro-level ‘terrorism’ of which Foucault accused Sartre, or the macro-level ‘interdictions’ that we are currently witnessing on a global scale.

Given the lack of metaphysical or scientific certitude inherent with this type of philosophical work — something clearly at odds with today’s career orientated and deterministic ‘outcome based’ education systems — and given the increasingly neo-conservative attempts to censor controversial counter-discursive works of literature and cultural expressions in general, I would argue that both philosophical and literary explorations of subjectivity effectively defamiliarise the taken-for-granted discourses of everyday life, and reassure us that, despite the apparent a priori nature of contemporary society and subjectivity, these narratives are always already arbitrary, irrevocably diminished, and therefore, when at their most oppressive, remain vulnerable to the condition of the possibility of change.

Notes:

1 In his paper ‘Michel Foucault’ Paul Patton explains the development of his ‘archaeological’ and ‘genealogical’ approaches: “From a methodological point of view, Foucault’s work alternates between two approaches, sometimes combining both in a single study: first, an ‘archaeological’ approach concerned to describe the historical presuppositions of a given system of thought, along with the forms of exclusion or limitation they establish in regard to what may be said and done […] Second, there is a genealogical approach, which Foucault brings to the fore in his latter books. This is concerned to trace the historical process by which a given system comes into being and is subsequently transformed. Genealogy is concerned with origins, but in the manner of Nietzsche’s On the Genealogy of Morals. Its purpose is not to discover the stable essence at the beginning of things, but rather to display their plural and discontinuous origins, their singularity as historical objects and their capacity for being reconverted to new ends by external forces” (1989:226-27).

2 Paul Patton explains the diverse perspectives and recurrent doubts Foucault held regarding his own enterprise explaining that: “Foucault himself has offered a plethora of global characterisations of his work over the years. For example, he has suggested that his essential concern is to define the system of limits and exclusions which make up our cultural unconscious. Elsewhere, he has suggested that he has always been concerned with power, even if previously unaware of it. More recently, he has proposed that his overall objective has been to ‘create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects.’ In part, these different presentations correspond to real shifts in the theoretical style and objects of his work. They also reflect a tendency to provide an elaborate theoretical framework
for each particular historical study and then to reinterpret past work in terms of the current project. The effect is always to locate a given study within a broader historical and analytical perspective” (1989:227).

3 In his ‘Introduction’ to the English translation of ‘The Order of Discourse,’ Robert Young explains that: “Foucault, therefore, himself attempted to produce a new form of discourse, an ‘ungrounded language,’ in which the inclusion/exclusion, inside/outside, opposition of reason and madness would be effaced. The attempt to hear the silence of madness led Foucault to turn to literature (to Sade, Nietzsche, Artaud) in search of its authentic voice. The difficulty, even impossibility, of finding its form of discourse elsewhere led to reflection on all those rules, systems and procedures which constitute, and are constituted by, our ‘will to knowledge.’ These, Foucault argues, comprise a discrete realm of discursive practices — the ‘order of discourse’ — a conceptual terrain in which knowledge is formed and produced. What is analysed not simply what was thought or said per se, but all the discursive rules and categories that were a priori, assumed as a constituent part of discourse and therefore of knowledge, and so fundamental that they remained unvoiced and unthought” (1981:48).

4 In his ‘Preface’ to Gilles Deleuze’s text Foucault, Bové explains the confusion surrounding his texts, and his own academic self-interest in Foucault, explaining that: “Many of Foucault’s most telling statements — often some of his weakest and most controversial — come in interviews and occasional essays. They often occur in an admonitory mode when he tries to correct the very self-interested images of him and his work that scholars create in line with their own intellectual, political, and professional care. Because there is commonly such a buzz of contradictory comment going on around him — as his friends and enemies push him to the left, right, and center or sometimes off the political spectrum altogether — Foucault could assert that it proves what he contends; conventional categories don’t fit him; he is posing an entirely new and different set of questions about a whole range of sometimes unthought of matters” (1988:vii-viii).

5 Foucault humorously indicates the discontinuities in his own work in The Uses of Pleasure in a faux interview wherein he asks: “Aren’t you sure of what you’re saying? Are you going to change yet again, shift your position according to the questions that are put to you, and say that the objections are not really directed at the place from which you are speaking? Are you going to declare yet again that you have never been what you have been reproached with being? Are you already preparing the way out that will enable you in your next book to spring up somewhere else and declare as you’re now doing: no, no, I’m not where you are lying in wait for me, but over here laughing at you?” (1983:17).

6 Foucault explains the positive possibilities of the ineluctably discursive nature of power arguing that: “Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect or power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power, it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (1984:101).

7 In Alan Sheridan’s text, Michel Foucault: Will to Truth, he explains that: “In the last hundred years, a whole mass of social controls has grown up, screening the sexuality of its citizens, of all ages, in every form of relationship, warning, protecting, and condemning, calling for diagnoses, piling up reports, organizing therapies. Sex has become an area fraught with innumerable dangers, known and unknown; everyone must be aware of it; everyone must speak of it. Sex was driven out of hiding and forced to live a discursive existence” (1980:172-73).

8 Macey explains Foucault’s exasperation and recognition of the condition of the possibility of change at Roland Barthes death stating that: “For Foucault, the death of Barthes was a ‘scandal’ because he had died at the height of his creative powers. The circumstances were also an uncannily graphic reminder of the accident which had left him hospitalised for a week in 1978” (1993:428). That is, of the time when Foucault himself was knocked down by an automobile.

9 Worryingly Miller’s The Passion of Michel Foucault — a fascinating narrative interpretation of Foucault’s life — begins with this premise: “My research began with a rumour — one that I know believe to be essentially false. One evening in the spring of 1987, an old friend […] relayed a shocking piece of gossip: knowing he was dying of AIDS, Michel Foucault in 1983 had gone to gay bathhouses in America, and deliberately tried to infect other people with the disease” (1994:375).

10 In his own study of Foucault’s life and work Macey indicates the confusion and doubt surrounding this possibility stating that: “According to his friend and translator Alan Sheridan, Foucault told him: ‘The doctors … did not know what was wrong with him. Among other possibilities, he talked about AIDS only to dismiss it.’ Paul Veyne was convinced that Foucault knew what was wrong, and Pierre Nora insists that he had told those around him that he knew” (1993:476).

11 Miller argues that: “Foucault’s death put Daniel Defert in a difficult position. For nearly a quarter of a century, he had shared Foucault’s life; in those last days, he had shared as well the agony of his death. But now, he realized, no one — neither the doctor, nor Foucault, if he knew — had told him the truth. In private, one friend of his had confided, Defert was furious. After all, his longtime lover had perhaps deceived him. He was upset as well that Foucault had not turned his death from AIDS into a public
political issue. Defert, a seasoned activist, must have known that a rare opportunity to educate the public had been squandered” (1994:23).

12 Following his own reading of Foucault’s life and work Miller explains that during a brief interview with Defert he believed that he may have deliberately taken the choice to run the risk of contracting AIDS explaining that: “‘It is quite possible,’ Defert remarked, ‘that he had a real knowledge of his near death, without making it a drama, but constructing, really everyday a [new kind of] relationship with others … Even if he was not certain about his own situation,’ the menace of AIDS was constantly on his mind. ‘He took AIDS very seriously,’ Defert continued. ‘When he went to San Francisco for the last time, he took it as a ‘limit-experience.’” I was stunned. Our conversation continued for another hour. But as I left Foucault’s old apartment that night, all I could think about was Defert’s deceptively simple statement: He took AIDS very seriously; he took it as a limit-experience” (1994:381).
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