

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

Geoff Bishop, BA (Hons)
Murdoch University 1997

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.

Contents

Acknowledgements:	v
Introduction:	1
Chapter 1: The Unconscious, the Symbolic & the Semiotic — Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva	5
1.1.a. Sigmund Freud — From Individual to Subject	5
1.2.a. Jacques Lacan and the Subject of Language	19
1.3.a. Julia Kristeva and the Subject of Revolutionary Language	31
1.4.a. In Summation — Chapter 1	43
Chapter 2: Phenomenology, Deconstruction and the Diminished Subject — Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida	46
2.1.a. Edmund Husserl — Phenomenology the Divided Theorist	46
2.2.a. Martin Heidegger — Phenomenology, Language and ‘Deconstruction’	59
2.3.a. Jacques Derrida — Deconstruction and the Diminished Subject	80
2.4.a. In Summation — Chapter 2	99
Chapter 3: Nihilism, Existentialism, Absurdism and the Diminished Subject — Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus	107
3.1.a. Friedrich Nietzsche and the Death of Metaphysics	107
3.2.a. Jean-Paul Sartre — Philosophy, Literature and The Diminished Subject	126
3.3.a. Albert Camus — The Absurd Rebel and the <i>Aporia</i> of Existence	146
3.4.a. In Summation — Chapter 3	166
Chapter 4: The Diminished Subject, Contemporary Theory and Literature — The Postmodern Condition and Generation X	175
4.1.a. PO-FACE 2007 — Against a Concept of Postmodernism?	175
4.2.a. The Postmodernism Condition, Contemporary Literature and Generation X	184
4.3.a. Apathy, Boredom and Nihilism — Generation X and <i>Less Than Zero</i>	199

4.4.a. In Summation — Chapter 4	214
Chapter 5: The Prescient Text — The Diminished Subject, Literature and Philosophy in <i>Trainspotting</i> , <i>Empire of the Senseless</i> , <i>Cocaine Nights</i> and <i>American Psycho</i>	218
5.1.a. Introduction	218
5.2.a. <i>Trainspotting</i> — Irvine Welsh, Psychoanalysis, Self-Presence and Heroin	218
5.2.a. <i>Empire of the Senseless</i> — Kathy Acker and the Failure of Theory	224
5.3.a. <i>Cocaine Nights</i> — J.G. Ballard, Dystopia and the Diminished Subject	230
5.4.a. <i>American Psycho</i> — Bret Easton Ellis and the Diminished Subject	242
Chapter 6: On Not Concluding —The Diminished Subject, The Metaphysics of Comfort, the Narrative of Self and Michel Foucault	263
6.1.a. An Ending By Way of Re-Introduction	263
6.2.a. Michel Foucault — A Narrative of a Philosophical Life	265
6.3.a. On Not Concluding But Continuing	284
Works Cited:	291

Acknowledgments

To begin with I would like to acknowledge the initial supervision of Professor Horst Ruthrof (*emeritus*) and his sage advice to structure this thesis carefully, something I adhered to, and which enabled me to continue working following his retirement and until I received a helpful shove from Professor Vijay Mishra. I would also like to extend my appreciation to the Murdoch University Division of Research and Development for granting me the privilege of undertaking this thesis, and to Karen Olkowski in particular, for her unerring support of this supposed ‘basket-case.’ I humbly ‘doff’ my cap to the ‘condition of the possibility of change’ for the unexpected exigencies that excessively prolonged my candidature, yet ironically gave me the time to really sink my teeth into this subject. I am gratefully indebted for the support of friends and family who refrained from asking how I was progressing *too often*. While finally, I apologise to a patient Jo Bregazzi for being forced to share this ‘subject’ with this thesis for far too long — and for letting me know! Thank you all.