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Dejan Ilić

# INHABITING THE “ZONE OF UNINHABITABILITY”

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS OF  
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## Abstract

This thesis consists of four parts: in the first part, Judith Butler's theory on subject and subjection is analyzed and interpreted within the framework of classical liberal tradition represented through the work of Isaiah Berlin, as well as within the anthropological and psychoanalytical thought of Mary Douglas and Julia Kristeva in order to outline the space for liberty within the world of socially constructed subjects.

Butler's insights on socially constructed identities and possibility of freedom then serve as a ground for interpretation of three works of literature which are usually considered almost unapproachable: Samuel Becket's *Unnamable*, David Albahari's *Koan of the Story* and Judita Salgo's *Road to Birobidzan*. The aim is to demonstrate that some theoretical problems of interpretation of works of literature could be solved within the theoretical contexts that are broader than the context of literary criticism itself. For example, if we are talking about the features of a narrator or other fictional characters, we implicitly or explicitly assume a whole set of definitions of what the person, self, or identity is. On the other hand, once we choose a broader theoretical framework, we ought to use all of those tools developed within literary theory for the purposes of interpretation. At the beginning of the chapter on Beckett's *The Unnamable* it is said that we could not use "old-fashioned" tools to interpret twentieth-century fiction. However, at the end of that chapter it turns out that it is possible to interpret *The Unnamable* in terms of the "classical" knowledge of literary criticism and particularly within the genre framework of the novel of formation. It becomes possible to do this by choosing an appropriate, broader theoretical framework, in this case – Butler's theoretical discussion on the possibility of agency of social constructed subjects.

# 1. INTRODUCING TERMS

THIS THESIS has the following structure: in the first part I describe the theoretical framework within which, in the second and third part of the thesis, I interpret three works of literature – a short sentence presented as a story, an unfinished novel presented as a complete work of literature, and another novel that is in literary criticism mainly presented as an anti-novel. Literary critics often consider these three works of literature as fiction that is nearly unapproachable for interpretation. My intention is to demonstrate that by choosing an appropriate theoretical framework, an interpreter can approach these works in an almost traditional way, that is, in a way traditional, realistic fiction is usually approached, although we are speaking about literature that is considered highly anti-traditional. On the other hand, the method I shall use to interpret these three works of literature is the same as the method I shall use to define the appropriate theoretical framework for my interpretations. This means that I try to place a highly groundbreaking theory within a rather traditional, humanistic-liberal context in order to emphasize some characteristics of a theory that could otherwise be neglected.

THE AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER and social anthropologist Judith Butler put forth the innovative theoretical view I am talking about. Against the idea

that feminist politics needs a firm notion of feminine identity, Butler argues that every identity is actually a social or cultural product. Developing the concept of the social construction of subjectivity, Butler also defines a world that is opposed to the world of socially constructed subjects and that is created simultaneously with and as the very condition of the existence of the latter. This other world, that Butler calls the "zone of uninhabitation," is a domain of – "abject beings." And "abject beings" are those who are not recognized as subjects within the framework of the "law," although the "law" produces them as well. In other words, "abject beings" are "marginal genders" that are excluded from the domain of subjects, that is, that are precluded from partaking in politics.

Yet, there is a sudden turn in this theoretical plot: although supposed to be invisible, "abject beings" emerge like "dread identification" as the very condition of one's being a subject, every time when one questions one's own subjectivity. The political issue of recognition of "abject beings" as subjects who are legitimate members of a society is one of the main topics Butler theorizes within the framework of queer theory. Her elaboration of the concept of "the citation of the law" is meant to create a political space within which abject beings or marginal genders ought to be recognized as subjects. Through its three aspects – performativity, reiteration, and abjection – the concept of "citation" opens a theoretical space within which Butler temporalizes the apparently eternal "law," and thus creates the possibility of agency within the seemingly completely determined world of socially constructed subjects.

WRITING ABOUT THE INHABITATION of the “zone of uninhabitation” I divide my thesis into three sections, plus one interlude. In the first chapter “Is There Freedom in the World of Socially Constructed Subjects,” through the comparison of Butler’s concept of agency with Isaiah Berlin’s famous two concepts of liberty, I give an account on what the zone of uninhabitation is; and, as it turns out, it is that inhabited by marginalized beings. In the chapter “The Hysteric versus the Hermeneutic Circle,” I construe Judita Šalgo’s novel *The Road to Birobidžan*, whose main character is Anna O., the famous patient of the Viennese psychiatrist Joseph Breuer, as a story of the failed attempt of the formation of a new identity. In the chapter “Forming the Identity of the I-narrator in Samuel Beckett’s *The Unnamable*,” I analyze Beckett’s novel in order to demonstrate the validity of Butler’s theorizing of possibility of agency. Butler’s theoretical insights on the subversion of identity serve as a suitable framework for an interpretation of Beckett’s novel, which is usually thought nearly unapproachable. Surprisingly, Butler’s discussion on the issue of identity allows me to construe Beckett’s novel in a rather traditional way. It is possible to say that Beckett’s novel, although it has been commonly regarded as a novel of all kinds of disintegration (of the story, of the characters, of the narrator, of the fictional time and space), could be read in a completely opposite way – as a novel of formation. Beckett’s unnamable speaker and Šalgo’s Anna O. can both be described as abject beings who are trying to establish themselves or to be recognized as subjects within their fictional worlds: Beckett’s “protagonist” within his own zone of uninhabitability, and Šalgo’s main character within the domain of



recognized subjects of her fictional world. Yet, while the unnamable speaker's effort can be considered successful, Šalgo's *Anna O.* fails to achieve recognition as a subject.

From the theoretical standpoint the first part of my thesis is of great importance. The validity of the whole thesis depends on a clear and sound definition of the zone of uninhabitation. On the one hand, I am trying to define it through the comparison of Berlin's and Butler's theories on political subjects and possibilities for their freedom, and, on the other, through the examination of the British anthropologist Mary Douglas's and the French-Bulgarian theorist Julia Kristeva's theories of the self. According to these theories, it is possible to closely relate the zone of uninhabitation to the body itself. Furthermore, it is possible even to equate the body and the territory of uninhabitation. To put it more precisely: it is possible to demonstrate that the body is divided into two zones that actually fully overlap: the zone of inhabitation and the zone of uninhabitation. The body itself, as well as the identity or the idea of the self, is the focus of severe political or cultural coercion that keeps society together and prevents it from falling apart. I would argue that the parts of the body that resist social constraints form the zone of uninhabitation, and, as Butler explains, provide the possibility for agency, and hence for political recognition of "abject beings."

I find that Judita Šalgo's *The Road to Birobidžan* and Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable* – the two novels that I take into consideration – in a certain way confirm Butler's concept of "truly" subversive parody which enables "abject beings" to undermine the "law" in order to be

recognized as subjects by the same "law." This confirmation is possible on the grounds of a clear analogy between the fictional world and the characters created within the frame of the narrative texts, on the one hand, and the so-called real world and subjects understood within the framework of the theories of "social constructivism," on the other. In both cases fictional characters and real persons are seen as a kind of artificial construction.

In his book *Literary Theory*, which is actually his latest "very short introduction" to the subject (after the two more detailed introductions to structuralism and deconstruction), the British critic Jonathan Culler devotes a whole chapter to the issues of identity, identification and the subject. Culler affirms that "literature has always been concerned with questions about identity, and literary works sketch answers, implicitly or explicitly, to these questions" (Culler 2000: 106). "Literary works," Culler continues, "offer a range of implicit models of how identity is formed" (Culler 2000: 106). Furthermore: "Literature has not only made identity a theme; it has played a significant role in the construction of the identity of readers" (Culler 2000: 108). Even though he pays close attention to Judith Butler's theoretical framework<sup>1</sup> – among other things, he stresses that "as Judith Butler explains, 'the reconceptualization of identity as an *effect*, that is, as *produced* or *generated* opens up possibilities of 'agency' that are

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<sup>1</sup> It is very interesting that Culler devotes some ten pages to Judith Butler's theoretical work in an overall introduction to literary theory that does not exceed a hundred pages. This is even more striking if we take into account that, on the one hand, Judith Butler is not a literary critic or theorist and, on the other, some important critics and theorists who contributed much to literary theory and criticism are not even mentioned in Culler's *Introduction*.

insidiously foreclosed by positions that take identity categories as foundational and fixed” (Culler 2000: 113) – Culler fails to make a strong connection between “models of how identity is formed” within fictional worlds and how identity is “*produced or generated*” within the “world of socially constructed subjects.” He maintains that he perceives literature merely as a source of “rich materials for complicating political and sociological accounts of the role of such [political and sociological] factors in the construction of identity” (Culler 2000: 106). However, within the theoretical framework of Judith Butler, literature could assume a much more important role.

**I**

## 2. IS THERE FREEDOM IN THE WORLD OF SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED SUBJECTS?

### I

IN HIS ESSAY "Two Concepts of Liberty," stressing that probably there is no need to demonstrate something that is so obviously true, the liberal philosopher Isaiah Berlin asserts that "conceptions of freedom directly derive from views of what constitutes a self, a person, a man" (Berlin 1969: 134). However, although he gives and elaborates two precise definitions – positive and negative – of liberty, Berlin does not engage in trying to define "what constitutes a self, a person, a man," or, one would say, eventually, a woman. Regarding different theoretical standpoints, this lack of a certain notion of a self could be seen as a weak spot in Berlin's discussion on liberty that foregrounds his relativism, as well as, on the contrary, the sign of a philosopher's deliberate avoidance of the metaphysical implications of such a concept that in fact strengthens his argumentation.

Berlin approaches two senses of liberty – positive and negative – through answering the following two questions respectively: "What is the area within which the subject – a person or group of persons – is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons?" and "What, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that?" (Berlin 1969: 121-2). It is not necessary to read these questions carefully to see why Berlin avoids defining the subject and why he maintains broad and vague

concepts of “his *natural* faculties” (Berlin 1969: 124; my italics) or “the essence of his human *nature*” (Berlin 1969: 126; my italics).

It is obvious that someone who would claim that Berlin’s concepts of liberty lack a firm ground because he does not define what “natural faculties” and “the essence of human nature” actually are, ought to argue that it is possible to say what the essence of human nature exactly is. Furthermore, not only should someone assert that this is possible, but it has often happened that people who “know” this “essence” think that this “knowledge” gives them the ultimate right – to be precise, it happens from time to time that some of them think that it gives them the right – to control or determine individuals as well as groups to do, or be, this (“the essence of human nature”) rather than that (a malformation of “the essence of humane nature”). And that is exactly what Berlin tries and manages to avoid by leaving the concepts of man’s “natural faculties” and “the essence of human nature” rather understated. “What is this essence? What are the standards which it entails?” Berlin asks, and then continues, “This has been, and perhaps always will be, a matter of infinite debate” (Berlin 1969: 126). Thus, one of the aspects of liberty implies that we “must preserve a minimum area of personal freedom” (Berlin 1969: 126), within which we can pursue, Berlin claims by quoting J. S. Mill, “our own good in our own way” (Berlin 1969: 127). In other words, Berlin argues that particularly because it is “a matter of infinite debate,” we must preserve a minimum area of personal freedom within which one can be what one thinks that one has to be according to one’s own notion of the human essence.

In a way, it could be said that Berlin's understanding of freedom partly relies on the fact that the debate on the essence of human nature is infinite, that is, that man's "natural faculties" cannot be defined. This is how the American philosopher Richard Rorty reads Berlin's reading of Mill's phrase "experiments in living": in such an interpretation, the lack of a precise definition of a self, a person, a man, becomes the corner stone of Berlin's defense of liberty "against telic conceptions of human perfection" (Rorty 1989: 45). However, this indeterminate notion of the subject exposes Berlin's concepts of liberty to a more serious criticism.

To put it simply, Berlin's concepts of liberty presuppose the existence of the subject "before the law"<sup>2</sup> (one of the aspects of "negative liberty" is that one should be left to be what one is already able to be). Furthermore, this subject is already capable of doing something regardless of the "law" (the other aspect of "negative liberty" is that one should be left to do what one is already able to do). Finally – and this is the whole concept of negative liberty – the subject should be left to do or be what s/he is able to do or be within a certain area. Thus we have the subject before, therefore out of the "law," and then the same subject within the framework of the "law" – the "law" that should leave to a certain extent and in a certain area her or him to be what s/he was before and do what s/he did before. "Before" in this context should be related to the adjective "natural" and the noun

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<sup>2</sup> This is Butler's phrase. She uses "before the law" to allude to Derrida's interpretation of Kafka's story "Before the Law." Further in the text I will use the word "law" in quotation marks to highlight that its meaning in this context cannot be reduced to the meaning of the strictly juridical term. Here its meaning should be much broader to encompass general meanings of words such as "language," "symbolic order," "discourse of power," "thought style."

“nature.” That is, “before” is thought to foreground that the words “natural” and “nature” denote something that precedes the “law” and something that is exposed to the “law.” Therefore, “natural” and “nature” have to be understood in opposition to the “law.”

Thus we have the subject’s “natural faculties” and “human nature” that cannot be defined. At the same time, following Berlin, it is possible to claim that the subject’s “natural faculties” and “human nature” oppose and precede the “law.” Indeterminacy of the subject’s “natural faculties” and “human nature” is the very condition for her or his liberty within the frame of the “law.” It turns out that Berlin’s concepts of liberty are grounded on two premises: first, that there is the subject before the “law;” and, second, that the subject cannot be defined. If this is the valid interpretation of Berlin’s writings, it seems that one question can challenge the whole structure of his concepts of liberty: Is there really a subject that precedes the “law”? What happens to liberty if the “law” in fact forms the subject? If the self is a creation of society do Berlin’s concepts of liberty make any sense?

## II

SIMILAR QUESTIONS about Berlin’s thoughts on liberty could be posed from a slightly different standpoint offered within the theoretical framework of the British anthropologist Mary Douglas. Although this is not a direct way to discuss these questions, it will help us to better understand Judith Butler’s theoretical insights, which will be discussed later.



Writing about the idea of the self, Mary Douglas uses, again,<sup>3</sup> Ludwik Fleck's concept of "thought style." Fleck argues, as Douglas explains, that in any community, or "thought-collective," there is "a more or less disciplined, consensually agreed set of principles about how the world is, and what is a fact and what is speculation," that Fleck calls "thought style" (Douglas 1992: 211). Fleck's term "thought style," as Douglas construes and develops it, denotes a general framework of norms and principles within which members of a community place their experience in order to interpret it and establish its meaning. Since thought style differs from one community to another, it is obvious that it is not universal or ultimate knowledge, although within a certain community it is usually manifested or represented as such. Therefore, it is possible to say that it is not meant either to provide truth, or serve as a firm ground for the search of truth. Thought style can be viewed instead as a web of presumptions, principles, norms, and values, that keeps a certain community together, that is, prevents it from falling apart. In this way it becomes clear why every culture protects some of these presumptions, principles, norms, or values from questioning, by declaring that it is not possible to scrutinize them. "Such avoidance," Douglas explains, "is known as taboo behavior" (Douglas 1992: 212).

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<sup>3</sup> In her book *How Institutions Think*, Douglas relies on Emile Durkheim's and Ludwik Fleck's theoretical insights in developing her own theory of socially grounded cognition. Without going into details, it could be said that it is possible to make a parallel between Douglas's use of the term "thought style" and Butler's use of the "law."

Fleck develops his concept of thought style by using examples from scientific communities. However, Douglas finds that Fleck's thought collectives can be understood in a much broader sense. To exemplify this, Douglas uses knowledge of or the broad consensus about the nature of the self and the person as "one of those areas of protected public ignorance" in "Western industrial culture" (Douglas 1992: 212). In other words, Douglas views Western society as a type of thought collective, and the notion of "the unitary, rational, once and for all embodied person" (Douglas 1992: 211) as a matter that is protected from questioning within the framework of its own particular thought style. In other words, the idea of the self is tabooed by Western culture. "The case of maintaining that nothing can be argued about the self," Douglas asserts, "is that the idea of the self is heavily locked into ideology" (Douglas 1992: 212). That is, "the idea of the self driven by self-regarding motives is undoubtedly an ideological and cultural construct" (Douglas 1992: 213). To demonstrate this, Douglas claims, one needs to "identify other self concepts, responding to other ideological demands, within a typology of possible ideologies" (Douglas 1992: 213). In her essay "Thought Style Exemplified," Douglas provides such a concept of the self, and thus demonstrates her idea of Western culture as a thought collective, and the notion of the unitary, rational, once and for all embodied person as a taboo. Consequently, the thought style of Western culture is shown as neither universal nor ultimate. However, this provisional concept of the self will not be discussed here. What I am going to do is briefly retell Douglas's account of what constitutes the taboo of the self in Western culture.

However, this is not an easy task. Although it is taken for granted that we are talking about a “unitary, continuous, responsible self” (Douglas 1992: 215), it turns out that we are actually talking about the “ineffable self” (Douglas 1992: 215). An ineffable or unnamable self can be viewed as a product of a twofold process. On the one hand, the concept of the ineffable self is meant to prevent any definition of a person that is “apt to become an instrument of coercion” (Douglas 1992: 214). Discussing Berlin’s two concepts of freedom as an attempt of avoidance of such a definition and its consequences, Douglas infers that Berlin deliberately empties the concept of the person. And that is exactly what we find on the other hand: the strategy of tabooing the notion of personhood by placing an inner self, the real person, beyond knowledge. Hence, there is a doomed attempt to avoid definitions in order to preserve the possibility of freedom for the self, since:

The idea of the ineffable self is just a blank space, a no-go area for logical discourse. It gives no entry for reasoning and no hold in rational debate against our own possible wishes to espouse arbitrary, coercive theories of selfhood and personhood. (Douglas 1992: 216)

And it turns out that “this idea of the self could be just as coercive as any other” (Douglas 1992: 214). Actually, it is coercive in a particular way. Douglas explains that over the past three hundred years, the notions of the self and the person have been divided in the discourse of Western civilization:

The category of self has been classified as the subject, inherently unknowable. The category of person has been filled by the need to meet the forensic requirements of a law-abiding society and an effective, rational judicial system. (Douglas 1992: 214)

Following Douglas's discussion, it could be said that the category of person has not only been filled by the need to meet forensic requirements: the category of person has also been filled by the need to be embodied. In other words, in order to meet the forensic requirements a "person" needs to have a "body."

This demand imposes a non-negotiable link between the person and the person's living body. Because of embodiment, we cannot claim to be able to be in three places, or two, at the same time. For the jury the capacities of the self have to conform to the accepted constraints of space and time. (Douglas 1992: 216)

This has several consequences. First, the concept of the multiple self is completely unacceptable, for "the jury room has no use for a concept of person with several constituent selves because responsibility must not be diffused" (Douglas 1992: 217). Further, the concept of the passive self cannot be accepted, which means that it is rather useless to excuse in court someone's behavior as being influenced by "furies, capricious gods, demons, personified emotions" (Douglas 1992: 217). If we are to accept

such explanations, Douglas argues, it would "entail a great deal of rewriting of the law-books" (Douglas 1992: 217). Even if we feel, to use Douglas's words, "at the level of our gut response," that there is something inappropriate about such a concept of personhood, we are disabled from saying that exactly because the idea of the inner self has been placed beyond the limits of knowledge and rational investigation (Douglas 1992: 217). Thus, it turns out that "the idea of a unitary self, because it concords so well with our legal and economic institutions, exerts a stranglehold on public dialogue" (Douglas 1992: 217). Douglas's account of this specific version of self, "unitary and fully embodied... [as] the cornerstone of our civil liberties, a block against arbitrary defamation," makes one wonder how something metaphorically described as a stranglehold on public dialogue can at the same time be considered a cornerstone of our civil liberties. It is hardly consoling that this understanding of the self put an end to verdicts of witchcraft, an example Douglas uses to explain her account (Douglas 1992: 217).

Nonetheless, Douglas's claims could be rephrased considering the importance of the body. It is possible to say that the idea of the unified body somehow precedes the idea of the unitary self. Since it is impossible to say anything about the self as such, we can form a notion of a unitary self only through a fully embodied self, which means only through an idea of the body. Therefore, because of their strong mutual dependence, it is possible to perform a metonymic replacement of the "unitary self" with the "body" in the following way: The body, because it concords so well with our legal and economic institutions, exerts a stranglehold on public dialogue, just as

it is the cornerstone of our civil liberties, a block against arbitrary defamation, an armor which protects our emptied inner self.

Furthermore, if the "soul" and the "body" are in a certain way mutually replaceable, it means that it is also possible to restate Douglas's claims about the self as a construct of ideology in the following way: The idea of the unified, organized body is undoubtedly an ideological and cultural construct. And: The idea of the body is heavily locked into ideology.<sup>4</sup> Taking this into account, the questions asked about Berlin's concepts of liberty and the subject could be reformulated in the following way: Is there really a body that precedes the "law"? What happens to liberty if the "law" in fact forms the body? If the body is a creation of the "law," do Berlin's concepts of liberty make any sense?

### III

APPROACHING THESE ISSUES from a feminist perspective, Judith Butler writes:

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<sup>4</sup> In her classical works *Purity and Danger* and *Natural Symbols*, Douglas opens a way for viewing the symbolic significance of the body as a metaphor of social relations within a given community. Douglas follows Marcel Mauss when she claims that "the human body is always treated as an image of society and that there can be no natural way of considering the body that does not involve at the same time a social dimension" (Douglas 1996: 74). Furthermore, Douglas gave an account on how the "social body," the organization of community as a system of relations, performs a coercion on viewing and understanding the human body, and social behavior as well. And, the other way around, a particular perception of the body constrains the perception of society (Barnard 1998: 75). Writing about the "two bodies" in *Natural Symbols*, Douglas argues:

The social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived. The physical experience of the body, always modified by the social categories through which it is known, sustains a particular view of society. There is a continual exchange of meanings between the two kinds of bodily experience so that each reinforces the categories of the other. As a result of this interaction the body itself is a highly restricted medium of expression. The forms it adopts in movement and repose express social pressures in manifold ways. (Douglas 1996: 69)

The prevailing assumption of the ontological integrity of the subject before the law might be understood as the contemporary trace of the state of nature hypothesis, that foundationalist fable constitutive of the juridical structure of classical liberalism. The performative invocation of a nonhistorical "before" becomes the foundational premise that guarantees a presocial ontology of persons who freely consent to be governed and, thereby, constitute the legitimacy of the social contract. (Butler 1990: 3)

Like Berlin, Butler stresses that "the question of the subject is crucial for politics" (Butler 1990: 2); yet her reasons are quite different from Berlin's. She claims that "juridical subjects are invariably produced through certain exclusionary practices that do not 'show' once the juridical structure of politics has been established" (Butler 1990: 2). However, at this point, one is tempted to demonstrate a certain similarity between Berlin's and Butler's stances, in spite of the apparent differences. Butler's use of the terms "exclusionary practices" implies that there is something that can be excluded in the process of forming "juridical subjects." It can be said that, in Butler's terms, we have, on the one hand, "juridical subjects" and, on the other, something excluded – something that we can define, in Berlin's terms, as "natural subjects." The argument can follow Rorty's short examination of Foucault's claim that "our imagination and will are so limited by the socialization we have received that we are unable even to

propose an alternative to the society we have now" (Rorty 1989: 64). Underneath this claim Rorty finds that Foucault "still thinks in terms of something deep within human beings, which is deformed by acculturation," although, on the other hand, he agrees that the human subject "is simply whatever acculturation makes of it" (Rorty 1989: 64). The key term in this discussion is obviously the "subject" again. And Butler can simply answer these objections by stating that she is speaking exactly about subjects that do not exist before and are produced by the "law." There are no other subjects, apart from these. For something that is excluded we cannot use the term "subject," because this term is already inscribed in a certain way.

Juridical power inevitably "produces" what it claims merely to represent; hence, politics must be concerned with this dual function of power: the juridical and the productive. In effect, the law produces and then conceals the notion "of the subject before the law" in order to invoke that discursive formation as a naturalized foundational premise that subsequently legitimates that law's own regulatory hegemony. (Butler 1990: 2)

In other words, it is eventually possible to use the term "subject" to denote something or someone that is or who is excluded or not recognized as such by the "law," but first we should stipulate the term's new meaning. However, Butler is inclined to use the terms "abject beings" or "marginal genders" for those excluded by the "law" rather than to define a new meaning for the term "subject," because any new definition of the term



could imply that it is possible to have a subject who escapes or is excluded by the productive and regulatory hegemony of the "law." Eventually, Butler's final argument that there is nothing that precedes the "law," could be taken to mean that what is excluded by "exclusionary practices" is at the same time produced by the "law" itself.

Considering the concept of a socially constructed subject, what can we say about liberty? Can we rely on Berlin's discussion of the two concepts of liberty in such a context? It is possible to say that Berlin's definition of liberty does not work within this context. In Butler's terms, it does not make sense to say that one should be left to do or be what one is able to do or be, if social constraints are already imposed on "one" in order to make "one" out of one or whatever. "One" comes to being through or is made by the "law," hence "one" is able to be or do only what one is supposed to be or do.

Berlin would probably say that such a view is a kind of determinism, and he would be partly right. In fact, it would be unfair to say that Berlin was not aware of such a criticism. In his essay "Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century," he writes about "a new concept of the society":

There is one and only one direction in which a given aggregate of individuals is conceived to be traveling, driven thither by quasi-occult impersonal forces, such as their class structure, or their collective unconscious, or their racial origin, or the 'real' social or physical roots of this or that 'popular' or 'group' 'mythology'. The direction is alterable, but only by tampering with the hidden cause of behavior – those who

wish to tamper being, according to this view, free to a limited degree to determine their own direction and that of others not by the increase of rationality and by argument addressed to it, but by having a superior understanding of the machinery of social behavior and skill in manipulating it. (Berlin 1969: 32)

Berlin's arguments against such a determinism are rather expected: quoting St.-Simon's prophecy he points out that "the government of man will be replaced by the administration of things" (Berlin 1969: 33). The word "thing," denoting something that is artificial, reveals that Berlin rejects such a view because it is directly against one's "*natural* faculties" and the "essence of human *nature*."<sup>5</sup> Berlin underlines the great possibility that someone who holds such a view will be inclined to use violence to change an existing order. Thus, there are two steps in his argument against this concept. The first concerns "the essence of human nature," and the second the use of violence. However, there is no direct casual connection between the concept of socially determined subjects and the tendency to violence. Furthermore, there is no firm connection between the concept of socially determined subjects and determinism, though "the controversy over the meaning of *construction* appears to founder on the conventional philosophical polarity between free will and determinism" (Butler 1990: 8). In other words, there is a space for liberty even in theories of the social construction of subjectivity. Yet, liberty, according to such theories, cannot

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<sup>5</sup> Butler would probably claim that Berlin's "natural" and "nature" are "denoting a universal capacity for reason, moral deliberation, or language" (Butler 1990: 10).

be achieved through subjects' wider representation because this representation has an ironic consequence, which is unavoidable if we take into account "the constitutive powers of their own representational claims" (Butler 1990: 4). Butler explains that "the articulation of an identity within available cultural terms instates a definition that forecloses in advance the emergence of new identity concepts in and through politically engaged actions" (Butler 1990: 15). In other words, requests for wider representation as well as requests for being accepted as a new subject, that is, a subject different from recognized ones, must fail because there is no possibility of emergence and recognition of a new identity within the framework of the existing "law." A new identity cannot be recognized and therefore cannot be represented as a subject.

#### IV

IN HER TWO BOOKS, *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*, Butler provides a ground for establishing a concept of liberty that is quite different from Berlin's. This difference can be explained by taking into account Butler's shift in the debate from the political issues in the narrower sense, discussed by Berlin, to the issues of subject and identity. Her focus on the subject is a logical consequence of hers, as well as Berlin's, point that the question of the subject is a crucial one for politics. Furthermore it seems that that is the only possible way to explain how political engagement and, particularly, claims for political rights and freedom make sense in a world of socially constructed subjects. It is possible to say that Butler steps into

the area that Berlin defines as a space where the subject should be left to do, or be, what s/he is able to do, or be. To put it in Douglas's terms, Butler steps into a forbidden or tabooed area of a "protected" self. While Berlin is concerned with protecting this area as a space of freedom within a broader political space of coercion, Butler wants to see whether there is freedom in this area at all. It is obvious that this area is a space where subjects become candidates for taking part in the political life of a community. But it is also obvious, although Berlin tries to avoid such a view by leaving "human essence" undefined, that being a subject, according to theories of social constructivism, already implies the imposition of social and political constraints. The question is how one can make room for freedom by theorizing socially constructed subjects.

Butler starts with the claim that "obviously, the political task is not to refuse representational politics," and proceeds:

The juridical structures of language and politics constitute the contemporary field of power; hence, there is no position outside this field, but only a critical genealogy of its own legitimating practices. (Butler 1990: 5)

Thus, "the task is to formulate within this constituted frame a critique of the categories of identity that contemporary juridical structures engender, naturalize, and immobilize," and to trace "what qualifies as the juridical subject" (Butler 1990: 5). Then the second step is to deconstruct the assumption "that an identity must first be in place in order for political

interests to be elaborated and, subsequently, political action to be taken” (Butler 1990: 142). Butler emphasizes that “there need not be a ‘doer behind the deed’” (Butler 1990: 142). It is wrong to associate “agency” with “the viability of the ‘subject,’ where the ‘subject’ is understood to have some stable existence prior to the cultural field that it negotiates” (Butler 1990: 142). On the contrary, “the reconceptualization of identity as an *effect*, that is, as *produced* or *generated*, opens up possibilities of ‘agency’ that are insidiously foreclosed by positions that take identity categories as foundational and fixed” (Butler 1990: 147).

Butler refuses to compromise: she rejects the possibility that a culturally constructed subject could be vested with agency, which is to be its cognitive ability independent of its cultural determination. Butler highlights that according to this view, such a subject is “mired,” rather than fully constituted by the “culture” and “discourse,” and explains that “this move to qualify and enmire the preexisting subject has appeared necessary to establish a point of agency that is not fully *determined* by that culture and discourse” (Butler 1990: 143). However,

[...] this kind of reasoning falsely presumes (a) agency can only be established through recourse to a prediscursive “I,” even if that “I” is found in the midst of a discursive convergence, and (b) that to be constituted by discourse is to be determined by discourse, where determination foreclose the possibility of agency. (Butler 1990: 143)

Butler points out the difference between the concepts of “being constituted” and “being determined” by discourse:

Indeed, when the subject is said to be constituted, that means simply that the subject is a consequence of certain rule-governed discourses that govern the intelligible invocation of identity. The subject is not *determined* by the rules through which it is generated because signification is *not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition* that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantializing effects. (Butler 1990: 145)

It is clear now why it is so important for Butler’s theoretical rescue of the possibility of agency that there be no preexisting subject, a doer before and behind a deed. The subject is an effect of constant repetition of the rules and, “‘agency,’ then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition” (Butler 1990: 145). In *Gender Trouble*, Butler suggests that practices of parody can serve to reveal the way in which culture and discourse constitute the subject through the repetition of rules. Butler uses the rhetorical term to denote the practice that should help us disclose how the subject is made by the “law”: since parody is a technique of laying bare the device, or, in other words, a deliberate disclosure of basic discursive techniques, it seems that Butler’s critique of the production of identity and its categories has to lay bare those basic discursive techniques of forming subjects, in order to demonstrate that there is no ontological ground for being a human subject.

Practices of parody can serve to reengage and reconsolidate the very distinction between a privileged and naturalized gender configuration and one that appears as derived, phantasmatic, and mimetic – a failed copy, as it were. [...] Hence, there is a subversive laughter in the pastiche-effect of parodic practices in which the original, the authentic, and the real are themselves constituted as effects. (Butler 1990: 146)

One is tempted to ask: how can this kind of criticism or parody change something? If we are aware of these discursive techniques, it does not mean that we can change them. There is no compulsory logical sequence in which an awareness of something is followed by a possibility that it can be changed. The awareness is obviously a necessary condition, but it is not a sufficient one for a deliberate change. Indeed, Butler investigates a theoretical and political space within which those who have been excluded could be recognized as subjects. And she is fully aware that “[...] surely parody has been used to further a politics of despair, one which affirms a seemingly inevitable exclusion of marginal genders from the territory of the natural and real” (Butler 1990: 146). However, she claims that there is “a subversive laughter in the pastiche effect of parodic practices in which the original, the authentic, and the real are themselves constituted as effects.” Furthermore, Butler argues that the critical task is to disclose the strategies of repetition and make them subversive. These discursive strategies imply the possibility of contestation and subversion of identities, since identities are not pre-given, but produced through the discourse. Eventually, this

subversive repetition ought to deprive the hegemonic culture of the possibility to speak of naturalized or essentialist gender identities.

Yet, does this denial mean that marginal genders are finally enabled to acquire an identity and become subjects recognized by the "law"? If this is the meaning of Butler's argument, it seems, according to her own theory, that by deploying parodic strategies marginal genders pass through the process of the subjection to the "law" in which they lose their marginal features, "because the articulation of an identity within available cultural terms instates a definition that forecloses in advance the emergence of new identity concepts."

This is exactly what Berlin writes about. He states that the recognition of our own claim to be fully independent human beings depends on its recognition by others.

For what I am is, in large part, determined by what I feel and think; and what I feel and think is determined by the feeling and thought prevailing in the society to which I belong, of which, in Burke's sense, I form not an isolable atom, but an ingredient (to use a perilous but indispensable metaphor) in a social pattern. I may feel unfree in the sense of not being recognized as a self-governing individual human being... (Berlin 1969: 157)

However, it is not clear, even in Berlin's terms, how one can be an independent and self-governing subject if one has to be recognized by others as such a subject in order to become such a subject. And what are the



terms of recognition? Probably, one has to feel and think in accordance with the feeling and thought that prevail in the society to which one belongs. Likewise, Butler's "marginal genders" will be invisible, hence unfree, until they become recognized as "human beings" by others, and they will be recognized when their feelings and thoughts become similar to or the same as the prevailing ones. It seems that Berlin does not consider this a problem. As far as Butler's *Gender Trouble* is concerned, it seems that she does not succeed completely to preserve the theoretical possibility of marginal genders to be recognized as subjects and to rescue the concept of agency through the implementation of parodying strategies. A few years later, Butler poses the question that sounds like a comment on her first book:

What do we make of a resistance that can only undermine, but which appears to have no power to rearticulate the terms, the symbolic terms – to use Lacanian parlance – by which subjects are constituted, by which subjection is installed in the very formation of the subject? (Butler 1997: 89)

## V

THE AUTHORESS of *Gender Trouble* is not the only one who finds herself in such a vicious circle. A similar case can be found in Toril Moi's interpretation of Julia Kristeva's work:

If the Kristevan subject is always already in the symbolic order, how can such an implacably authoritarian, phallogocentric structure be broken up? It obviously cannot happen through a straightforward *rejection* of the symbolic order, since such a total failure to enter into human relations would, in Lacanian terms, make us psychotic. We have to accept our position as already inserted into an order that precedes us and from which there is no escape. There is no *other space* from which we can speak: if we are able to speak at all, it will have to be within the framework of symbolic language. (Moi 1985: 170)

Like Butler, Kristeva also does not want to accept the final conclusion of such premises: that there is no opportunity for resistance. Therefore she creates the concept of the “revolutionary subject”:

[...] a subject that is able to allow the *jouissance* of semiotic motility to disrupt the strict symbolic order. The example *par excellence* of this kind of ‘revolutionary’ activity is to be found in the writings of late-nineteenth century *avant-garde* poets like Lautreamont and Mallarme or modernist writers such as Joyce. (Moi 1985: 170)

One more solution of a similar kind is suggested by Richard Rorty, who develops the concept of a “strong poet.” There is an interesting analogy between Kristeva’s “revolutionary subjects” and Rorty’s “strong poets.”<sup>6</sup> In Rorty’s term, a strong poet is a person “who uses words as they have never

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<sup>6</sup> Rorty’s “strong poet” is in fact a reworked concept that was originally developed by the American literary critic and historian Harold Bloom.

before been used" (Rorty 1989: 28). A strong poet is capable of creating metaphors, and "when a metaphor is created it does not *express* something which previously existed, although, of course, it is *caused by* something that has previously existed" (Rorty 1989: 36).

The same goes for Kristeva's "revolutionary subjects" and for Butler's "marginal genders": the very moment a revolutionary subject is accepted and understood as a poet, s/he becomes an element of the symbolic order. One would expect Kristeva to be aware of this, since she relies heavily on the work of both Mikhail Bakhtin and Russian formalists. Bakhtin and the formalists foreground the ambivalence of parody as well as of other literary devices that distort or lay bare existing literary and linguistic patterns. By laying bare a device, the technique of parody distorts and, at the same time, renews, reestablishes, reinforces an existing pattern. Like any other literary device, parody is impossible outside of an existing literary order; hence the very possibility of parody is a structural element of the system. The same goes for metaphors:

Metaphors are unfamiliar uses of old words, but such uses are possible only against the background of other old words being used in old familiar ways. A language which was "all metaphor" would be a language which had no use, hence not a language but just a babble. For even if we agree that languages are not media of representation or expression, they will remain media of communication, tools for social interaction, ways of tying oneself up with other human beings. (Rorty 1989: 41)

Similarly, in *Bodies that Matter* Butler explains why it is impossible for the subject to resist norms through the occupation of a space that is not encompassed by the “law”:

The paradox of subjectivation (*assujétissement*) is precisely that the subject who would resist such norms is itself enabled, if not produced, by such norms. Although this constitutive constraint does not foreclose the possibility of agency, it does locate agency as a reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power. (Butler 1993: 15)

At first sight, parody seems like a dead-end in Butler’s theoretical efforts to rescue possibilities of agency in *Gender Trouble*. What Butler says about Kristeva’s notion of disruption of the “law” could also be said about Butler’s elaboration of parody in *Gender Trouble*: her (Kristeva’s) strategy of subversion “proves doubtful” (Butler 1990: 80). Butler is quite aware of this:

Parody by itself is not subversive, and there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony. (Butler 1990: 139)

Yet, in *Gender Trouble* Butler does not develop fully the concept of a truly troubling parody: her implicit understanding of the “law” as a static, never

changing structure prevents her from achieving the set goal. In *Gender Trouble* she views the position of a subject as already inserted into a pre-given and unchangeable order from which there is no escape. In her next book *Bodies that Matter*, she finds a theoretical way out by developing Foucault's concept of the "law" as a discursive structure that is in a continuous process of change: "To recast the symbolic as capable of this kind of resignification, it will be necessary to think of the symbolic as the temporalized regulation of signification, and not as a quasi-permanent structure" (Butler 1993: 23).

## VI

THIS CHANGE is not unexpected if we take into account one of the main characteristics of Butler's work – she is keen on deconstructing every binary opposition that is presented as natural, eternal, essential, metaphysical. She deconstructs these oppositions by showing that they are established within the framework of a certain discourse and that they cannot exist outside that framework. Every binary opposition is also a hierarchical one. This means that one part of the opposition is in a certain way submitted to the other part. The point is, as Judith Butler successfully demonstrates, that there are no two parts in a binary opposition, but only one, which dominates the hierarchical structure. The other part is produced by the discourse as a kind of ontological, metaphysical, essential ground that justifies the domination of the first one. Thus, unlike the French philosopher of deconstruction Jacques Derrida, who mainly turns

hierarchical oppositions upside down and thus actually preserves the existing structure of power,<sup>7</sup> Butler undermines it by reducing binary oppositions to the one element only. Examples of such oppositions are culture and nature, gender and sex, acculturated subject and natural subject. For example, Butler explains that in the sex/gender distinction sex is referred to as something that precedes gender, while it is actually a construction offered within language, "as that which is prior to language, prior to construction" (Butler 1993: 5). Apparent opposition between the "law" and the subject is of the same kind. That is, the subject is a product of a discourse that has to justify the domination of the "law" within the hierarchical binary structure of the "foundationalist fable constitutive of the juridical structure of classical liberalism." The same goes for the term "construction" itself. Although "construction" is seen as something that the subject is inevitably exposed to, Butler argues:

And here it would be no more right to claim that the term "construction" belongs at the grammatical site of the subject, for construction is neither a subject nor its act, but a process of reiteration by which both "subjects" and "acts" come to appear at all. There is no power that acts, but only a reiterated acting that is power in its persistence and instability. (Butler 1993: 9)

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<sup>7</sup> Here I have in mind John Ellis' critique of Derrida's interpretation of Saussure's linguistics, and, particularly, of his deconstruction of the so-called "logocentrism." See Ellis 1989: 18-66.

Making the existence of the “law” dependent on repetition – both subjects and the “law” appear simultaneously through the process of reiteration – Butler temporalizes the “law.” The process of reiteration is possible only if we understand “construction” as “temporalized regulation”: “construction not only takes place *in* time, but is itself a temporal process which operates through the reiteration of norms” (Butler 1993: 10).<sup>8</sup> The same goes for the symbolic law, for which Butler claims, after Nietzsche’s critique of the notion of God, that “the power attributed to this prior and ideal power is derived and deflected from the attribution itself” (Butler 1993: 14). Interpreting Lacan’s notion of the access to the symbolic law as a kind of “citing” the “law,” Butler finds it possible to oppose the presumption that the symbolic law “enjoys a separable ontology prior and autonomous to its assumption” by the notion that “the citation of the law is the very mechanism of its production and articulation” (Butler 1993: 15). The “citation” is also a kind of “temporalized regulation” – “a temporal process which operates through the reiteration of norms.”

Butler defines three aspects of the “citing”: preformativity, reiteration, and abjection.

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<sup>8</sup> In his account of Mary Douglas’s description of latent groups, offered in her book *How Institutions Think*, Richard Fardon, among other things, writes:

On Douglas’s account, a functionalist argument basically requires two elements. One is the idea of circularity: behavioural patterns exist that sustain a pattern of collective organization, which in turn reproduces the same behavioural patterns, which in turn sustain the collective organization – and so on, and so on. In other words, a functionalist argument requires a causal loop that explains the persistence of patterns of activity that tends to stabilize the matrix responsible for generating them. The second criterion of a functionalist argument is that this causal loop goes unrecognized by the social agents who make it happen. (Fardon 1999: 230)

It seems to me that there is a clear analogy between Douglas’s “unrecognized causal loop” and Butler’s concept of reiteration.

In the first instance, performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate "act," but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names. (Butler 1993: 2)

This explanation of performativity is rather different from John Austin's definition of the successful performative that includes certain conditions that have to be fulfilled, and it is in accordance with Derrida's interpretation, or rather misinterpretation, of Austin's linguistic theory. In Butler's terms, performativity itself sets the conditions through the performative act. For example, "regulatory norms of 'sex,'" Butler writes, "work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and, more specifically, to materialize the body's sex, to materialize sexual difference" (Butler 1993: 2). Performativity is, also, "always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms" (Butler 1993: 12). Actually, it becomes effective, that is, gains power through reiteration. The power of the performative is not the function of an origination, but is "always derivative" (Butler 1993: 13). Reiteration of a norm is also a process of exclusion:

This exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of object beings, those who are not yet "subjects," but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject. [...] This zone of uninhabitability will constitute the defining limit of the subject's domain; it will constitute that site of dread identification against which – and by virtue of which – the domain of the



subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and to life. (Butler 1993: 3)

Thus, one becomes the subject through the performative act, which becomes effective through the process of reiteration and is determined by abjection. The question is: "If performativity is construed as the power of discourse to produce effects through reiteration, how are we to understand the limits of such production, the constraints under which such production occurs?" (Butler 1993: 20). In other words, is there any space for freedom in this concept?

One could determine this area of freedom or agency as the very "zone of uninhabitability." As Butler emphasizes, this zone is at the same time outside and inside the subject:

In this sense, then, the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, "inside" the subject as its own founding repudiation. (Butler 1993: 3)

This is the reason why we can view this "outside" not only as something that "permanently resists discursive elaboration," but, at the same time, as "a variable boundary set and reset by specific political investments" (Butler 1993: 20). This changeable boundary, which cannot be grasped and defined by the discourse, frames the space in which new identities can emerge. And since it is changeable and dependent on specific political investments it

makes space for agency within the framework of practical political issues. Only in this regard, does Butler's use of parody actually become effective. By laying bare already established procedures of forming subjects it is possible to change them, since they have to be reiterated to become effective. By refusing to reiterate them as they are already established, "marginal genders" can succeed in being accepted as subjects who can take part in politics, and thus are able to argue for their rights.

## VII

ACCORDING TO BUTLER, whenever a subject questions its subjectivity, abject beings emerge as dread identifications. A dread identification is actually frightening in a particular way. It is dreaded because it cannot be accepted as a new identity, hence given a status of the subject within the framework of the "law." Therefore the subject is forced to accept a subjectivity offered within the range of allowed identifications. If the subject passes through the process of questioning by confirmation of its previous subjectivity, it means that "citation" was successful. However, what happens if the subject chooses the identity of an abject being? Furthermore, what happens if this abject being wants to regain the status of the subject within the framework of the "law"? In her essay "Subjection, Resistance, Resignification," Butler asks:

How does the process of subjectivation, the disciplinary production of the subject, break down [...]? Whence does that failure emerge, and what are its consequences? (Butler 1997: 95)

In order to answer these questions Butler discusses the Althusserian notion of interpellation. The French philosopher Louis Althusser believed that a subject is formed through the performative processes of addressing, naming. He argued that social demand in fact produced the subjects it named. However, there is always a possibility that something goes wrong and causes misidentification: "If one misrecognizes that effort to produce the subject, the production itself falters" (Butler 1997: 95). Here we have a case similar to those cases that Austin used to call unsuccessful performative acts. Implicitly Butler admits that performativity itself is not enough for producing subjects. There are some conditions that should also be fulfilled: for example, the condition of correct recognition. However, in this discussion Butler is not concerned with performativity itself. She is looking for the possibility of producing new identities. Therefore she continues to analyze these possible cases of misrecognition as an opportunity for new identities to emerge. Althusser placed the possibilities of misrecognition into the domain of the imaginary, and that directs Butler's examination to the following conclusion:

The imaginary thwarts the efficacy of the symbolic law but cannot turn back upon the law, demanding or effecting its reformulation. In this sense, psychic resistance thwarts the law in its effects, but cannot redirect the law or its effects. Resistance is thus located in a domain that is virtually powerless to alter the law that it opposes. Hence, psychic resistance presumes the continuation of the law in its anterior, symbolic form and, in

that sense, contributes to its status quo. In such a view, resistance appears doomed to perpetual defeat. (Butler 1997: 98)

Therefore we face again the same questions: How can these new identities be recognized by the "law"? What makes resistance to the law possible? Moreover, where does this need to be identified as "dread" come from? And where does the possibility of agency of object beings come from?

At the beginning of her essay "Subjection, Resistance, Resignification," Butler repeats after Foucault that "this process of subjectivation takes place centrally through the body" (Butler 1997: 83). The self is constituted through the production of the body. The subject can emerge only "at the expense of the body" (Butler 1997: 91). Hence Butler tries to examine the "body" itself in order to find a place of resistance. This is not surprising at all: we have already seen that the body can be given an important role when the idea of the self is discussed. Furthermore, in the analysis of Mary Douglas's essay on the idea of the self it became clear that in a certain context the self and the body are mutually replaceable, although in her exemplification of thought style, Douglas does not follow this direction. However, a number of other theorists, especially feminist thinkers, do.

"The various theorists," the Australian feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz writes, "have helped make explicit the claim that the body, as much as the psyche or the subject, can be regarded as a cultural and historical product" (Grosz 1994: 187). In her *Volatile Bodies*, Grosz distinguishes two major groups of feminist theorists who consider the body

a social construct. On the one hand we have those whom Grosz calls constructionists, for whom “the distinction between the ‘real’ biological body and the body as object of representation is a fundamental presumption” (Grosz 1994: 17). They do not question the superseding of the biological body or its functions: “the task is to give them different meanings and values” (Grosz 1994: 17).

Correlatively there is a presumption of a base/superstructure model in which biology provides a self-contained “natural” base and ideology provides a dependent parasitic “second story” which can be added – or not – leaving the base more or less as it is. (Grosz 1994: 17)

On the other side Grosz finds theorists of “sexual difference,” those for whom “the body is no longer understood as an ahistorical, biologically given, acultural object” (Grosz 1994: 18). They theorize “the lived body, the body insofar as it is represented and used in specific ways in particular cultures” (Grosz 1994: 18).

For them, the body is neither brute nor passive but is interwoven with and constitutive of systems of meaning, signification, and representation. On the one hand it is a signifying and signified body; on the other, it is an object of systems of social coercion, legal inscription, and sexual and economic exchange. (Grosz 1994: 18)

The difference between these two groups is not so obvious. It is possible to say that, at the level of social or cultural inscription and codification of the body, the difference is rather insignificant. What is at stake is the body itself. The former understand the body as “an inert, passive, noncultural and ahistorical term”; according to the latter, “the body may be seen as [...] the site of contestation, in a series of economic, political, sexual, and intellectual struggles” (Grosz 1994: 19).

Still, it is not clear how it is possible to view the body as a site of contestation. A number of questions can be posed: What kind of contestation? Who or what is struggling? What is the struggle about? Is the body just the site of the conflict or one of the parties involved in the conflict?

## VIII

LET US START, once again, from a new beginning. In her book *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas argues against the sharp distinction between so called primitive religions and the great religions of the world. She undertakes “to vindicate the so-called primitives from the charge of having a different logic or method of thinking” (Douglas 1992: 3). She claims that it is not possible to demonstrate that moderns “follow a line of reasoning from effects back to material causes,” while “primitives follow a line from misfortune to spiritual beings” (Douglas 1992: 3). Both primitives and moderns follow the same logic that can be comprehended as a “concern to protect society from behavior that will wreck it” (Douglas 1992: 4). In other

words, this logic could be explained as "thought style," namely, as "a creative movement, an attempt to relate form to function, to make unity of experience" (Douglas 1988: 2).

Unity of experience is created, as Douglas demonstrates in *Purity and Danger*, through rituals of purity and impurity (Douglas 1988: 2). These rituals establish symbolic patterns within and by which "disparate elements are related and disparate experience is given meaning" (Douglas 1988: 3). Ideas of impurity are also effective in the following ways: on the one hand as a means by which members of a certain society try to influence one another's behavior, and, on the other, as dangers that protect society by threatening transgressors. Pollution ideas can thus be viewed as the means through which certain norms and values are established as a system that gives meaning to experience, as well as a system of protection that ought to prevent a society's malfunction.

Douglas explains that there is no society that is all-encompassing or completely independent of its surroundings, therefore every society is exposed to external pressure, "that which is not with it, part of it and subject to its law, is potentially against it" (Douglas 1988: 4). Therefore an area around a border and the border itself are of high risk, that is, highly tabooed. Furthermore, according to Douglas, every society is established on a hostile territory:

For I believe that ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference

between within and without, about and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created. (Douglas 1988: 4)

In other words, Douglas claims that the creation of an order is possible only through forming strong hierarchical binary oppositions. An inherently untidy experience thus denotes an experience which is equivocal, uncertain, undecidable, and in order to avoid "a chaos of shifting impressions," each of us seeks to construct "a stable world in which objects have recognizable shapes, are located in depth, and have permanence" (Douglas 1988: 37), that is, a world of univocal, decidable meanings. It is possible for us to make such a world because "our interests are governed by a pattern-making tendency, sometimes called *schema*" (Douglas 1988: 37). Anything that does not fit into an established schema violates that order and ought to be seen as a matter out of place, or dirt. However, the very notion of dirt implies a system of defined relations, as well as an opposition to that system, which means that dirt is somehow an element of it: "Where there is dirt there is system" (Douglas 1988: 36). Therefore pollution could be viewed as one element of the general binary opposition, the other element being order. Does this mean that pollution is created by order as the very condition of its existence? And how is this related to those questions concerning the body?

It is possible to say that an element is missing in Douglas's examination of rituals of purity and impurity. She does not explain how is it that we have the capacity to respond to purity and impurity. How is it that we view the idea of impurity as something dangerous and threatening, so



that it can be used to protect an established order from transgression? Where does our capacity for disgust come from? Why are we afraid of the chaos of shifting impressions and seek to place ourselves within a stable world of binary oppositions, in which objects have recognizable shapes, are located in depth, and have permanence?

In her book *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva claims that Mary Douglas seems to view the human body as the "ultimate cause of the socio-economic causality" (Kristeva 1982: 66), where "socio-economic causality" in Douglas's terms could be understood as an order.<sup>9</sup> However, although Kristeva maintains that Douglas provides a sound explanation for the establishment of order by drawing attention to the human body, this claim seems like an overinterpretation. Rather Grosz is right when she states that Kristeva shifts Douglas's work on pollution and defilement from "a sociological and anthropological into a psychological and subjective register" (Grosz 1994: 193). In a way Kristeva is aware of this when she objects that Douglas "naively rejects" Freudian premises at the moment when "a concern to integrate Freudian data as semantic values connected with the psychosomatic functioning of the speaking subject" emerges in her thinking (Kristeva 1982: 66). Therefore it is possible to say that while she

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<sup>9</sup> In her essay "Self-evidence," opening with a quotation from Hume, Douglas makes the firm connection between causality and an universe of principles or order:

Over two hundred years ago David Hume declared that there is no necessity in Nature: 'Necessity is something that exists in the mind, not in objects.' In other words, he insisted that knowledge of causality is of the intuitional kind, guts knowledge; causality is no more than a 'construction upon past experience'; it is due to 'force of habit', a part of human nature whose study, he averred, is too much neglected. As anthropologists our work has been precisely to study this habit which constructs for each society its special universe of efficacious principles. (Douglas 1999: 252)

speaks about Douglas, Kristeva actually speaks about herself, that is, about her intention to view the human body as the ultimate cause of socio-economic causality. In other words, Kristeva explains the establishment of order by taking into account the psychosomatic functioning of the speaking subject. Kristeva poses the hypothesis that "a social (symbolic) system *corresponds* to a specific structuration of the speaking subject in the *symbolic order*" (Kristeva 1982: 67).<sup>10</sup> This means that Kristeva assumes that the symbolic system and the speaking subject are similarly structured. Furthermore, this means that it is possible to explain the formation of the human body as a web of psychosomatic functions through an analogy with the creation of order. Finally, this means that in order to describe the formation of the human body, one can rely heavily on "the fundamental work of Mary Douglas" (Kristeva 1982: 65). However, it is also possible to say that by shifting the discussion into a psychological and subjective register, Kristeva provides an appropriate framework for Douglas's study on defilement, that is, on the establishment of order, and gives the answer to the question where our capacity for disgust comes from.

Kristeva replaces Douglas's term "defilement" by the French word "l'abjection." In an interview on feminism and psychoanalysis, Kristeva undertakes to explain its meaning:

*L'abjection* is something that disgusts you, for example, you see something rotting and you want to vomit – it is an extremely strong feeling that is at once somatic and symbolic, which is above all a revolt

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<sup>10</sup> The symbolic order in this context could be understood as a thought style.

against an external menace from which one wants to distance oneself, but of which one has the impression that it may menace us from the inside. The relation to abjection is finally rooted in the combat that every human being carries on with the mother. For in order to become autonomous, it is necessary that one cut the instinctual dyad of the mother and the child and that one become something other. (Kristeva 1996: 118)

According to this explanation, something that is abject causes at the same time strong bodily as well as symbolic responses that can be understood as an extreme reaction against the threat that comes from the outside, and, as it turns out, from the inside as well. And the example of the abject thing is "something rotting." How are we to understand this? Something that is rotting is something that loses its shape, thus something that cannot be clearly defined. As something that is undecidable it violates oppositions established within the order, thus jeopardizing the order itself by turning us toward the chaos of shifting impressions. Therefore there is a strong symbolic response against this external menace. However, what about the menace from the inside and the somatic reaction? This is obviously related to the combat that every human being carries on with the mother in order to become an autonomous subject. Thus we step into the space of the *chora*.

It is possible to say that Kristeva's term "chora" encompasses Douglas's "chaos of shifting impressions." At the same time Kristeva's term unifies concepts of society and its surroundings separated and opposed to each other in Douglas's theory. This is a very important theoretical step

towards Butler's theory in which there is no point external to the "law." Kristeva takes this concept from Plato and redefines it in a way that Toril Moi describes as follows: it is "neither sign nor a position, but 'a wholly provisional articulation that is essentially mobile and constituted of movements and their ephemeral stases'" (Moi 1990: 161). To establish meaning, a chaotic continuum must be split. Splitting the *chora* enables the subject, as Toril Moi explains in her essay on Kristeva, "to attribute differences and thus signification to what was the ceaseless heterogeneity of the *chora*" (Moi 1990: 162). Nevertheless, this attribution is possible only after the "mirror stage." This means that the *chora* also denotes the instinctual dyad of the mother and the child that needs to be cut if one is to become something other. In the "mirror phase" one recognizes one's own image in a mirror as one's first self-image. Stabilization of one's identity is finished when one becomes capable of pronouncing sentences that conform to the rules, that is, to the "law." The point is that one's first self-image is exactly the image of its own body. The moment when one becomes able to distinguish one's own body is the moment when one is enabled to enter the symbolic order. But that is also the moment of the formation of the domain of abjection. The first image of one's self is not stable, the image of the body is not the real one. It is only an image. Therefore, anything that can violate its unstable shape has to be rejected, placed into the domain of abjection. Kristeva describes the human body as "the prototype of that translucent being constituted by society as symbolic system" (Kristeva 1982: 66). Consequently, we can describe the abjected parts of the body as the dark or dirty side of the "translucent being."

It is possible now to make an analogy between Kristeva's description of forming the human body and Douglas's description of establishing an order. Elizabeth Grosz elaborates this as follows:

Relying heavily on Mary Douglas's innovative text *Purity and Danger*, Kristeva asks about the conditions under which the clean and proper body, the obedient, law-abiding, social body, emerges, the cost of its emergence, which she designates by the term *abjection*, and the functions that demarcating a clean and proper body for the social subject have in the transmission and production of specific body types. The abject is what of the body falls away from it while remaining irreducible to the subject/object and inside/outside oppositions. The abject necessarily partakes of both polarized terms but cannot be clearly identified with either. (Grosz 1994: 192)

We can also relate Kristeva's concept of the *chora* to Douglas's idea of an inherently untidy experience. The contrast between the *chora* and the symbolic order could be compared to the distinction between the chaos of shifting impressions on the one hand and the clear division between purity and impurity on the other. Splitting the *chora* resembles the process of defilement through which purity and impurity are defined. Therefore it is possible to conclude that order is established and structured like the human body, as well as the other way around, that the human body is established and structured like order. As Kristeva suggests, we can leave out "questions of cause and effect," that is, whether the social is determined by the

subjective, or if it is the other way around (Kristeva 1982: 67). Yet, within the theoretical context of Butler's writings it seems that there is no doubt that the subject is formed by the "law" through the formation of the body. Furthermore, this relation between the body and the order is of great importance in another way: those parts of the body that are the objects of defilement provide a ground for resistance and change.<sup>11</sup> The body thus becomes a site of conflict between two tendencies: one that tries to preserve the existing order, and the other that strives to change it. Moreover, the body is not just a site; it is at the same time a cause of the conflict.

There is one more question that should be asked. Even if we locate the source of resistance in the "law," we still have to explain how this resistance can be successful. This is the question that Judith Butler tries to answer in her essay "Subjection, Resistance, Resignification." In this essay Butler repeats her main assumptions about the subject who cannot be produced in his/her totality through immediate subjectivation. S/he is, instead, in a permanent process of its own being produced. S/he is not

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<sup>11</sup> But it seems that something cannot be changed: the very pattern of binary opposition. Writing about "the dilemma of identity," Amber Ault points out that a pattern of exclusion or defilement can be traced throughout a society. Even marginalized groups abjected by the dominant group, Ault explains, "construct the boundaries of their identities and, as a result, have begun to explicate processes both counter-intuitive to us as social and political actors and predictable to us as sociologists: marginalized, stigmatized, and deviant groups themselves engage in their own processes of stigmatization" (Ault 1996: 311). It could be said that we find ourselves in a vicious circle of binary oppositions at any level of a society or within patterns of identity of individual subjects or groups. It seems that the establishment of any kind of identity demands certain exclusion of something else. And if that something is to be recognized, something else must be excluded again. However, the question whether it is possible to avoid these binary patterns of the establishment of order, the body, and the self, misses the point. These binary patterns actually permanently provide conditions for agency, change, and the emergence of new identities.

reproduced repeatedly; s/he is produced in repetition. This repetition prevents the dissociated unity, the subject, from consolidation and normalization. Yet, although this repetition can undermine the rules of producing subjects, it does not mean that it can change them. Neither does the failure of the "law" at "the level of the psyche" (Butler 1997: 98). Psychic resistance can never displace or reformulate the "law." The only source of power within Butler's theoretical work is power itself, that is, the "law" itself, and therefore only the "law" has enough power to undermine itself. And it can do that through its own investment in the body, since, as we have seen, the body is the site of the greatest investment of the power of the "law." The other word for this investment is "sexuality." Sexuality "provides productive contradiction in terms" that enables Butler to create a space for successful resistance:

If the very process of subject-formation, however, requires a preemption of sexuality, a founding prohibition that prohibits a certain desire but itself becomes a focus of desire, then a subject is formed through the prohibition of sexuality, a prohibition that at the same time forms this sexuality – and the subject who is said to bear it. [...] In this sense, a "sexual identity" is a productive contradiction in terms, for identity is formed through a prohibition on some dimension of the very sexuality it is said to bear, and sexuality, when it is tied to identity, is always in some sense undercutting itself. (Butler 1997: 103-104)

This prohibited, or abjected, sexuality that emerges through the prohibition itself, causes injurious interpellations or defilement, which “could also be the site of radical reoccupation and resignification”. This process of resignification could be viewed in terms of productive contradiction again.

Called by an injurious name, I come into social being, and because I have a certain inevitable attachment to my existence, because a certain narcissism takes hold of any term that confers existence, I am led to embrace the terms that injure me because they constitute me socially. [...]

As a further paradox, then, only by occupying – being occupied by – that injurious term can I resist and oppose it, recasting the power that constitutes me as the power I oppose. (Butler 1997: 104)

It seems after all that the possibility of agency is the consequence of a malfunction of the “law.” Nevertheless, it is the only logical conclusion within the sequence of Butler’s assumptions. As already said, her method of deconstruction of binary oppositions is to reduce them to one of the two elements, namely the one that dominates the hierarchical opposition. Thus, it is not surprising that in any binary opposition whose one element is power, the other element is to be eliminated through Butler’s deconstructive way of reasoning. On the other hand, it is also expected that the “law” as an emanation of supreme power cannot be opposed effectively by anything but itself. However, it seems that in her essay on subjection, resistance, and resignification, Butler leaves room for a conclusion that there must be something else, apart from the “law,” something that helps, or causes the



malfunction of power – the body itself, or, as Judith Butler likes to put it, “bodies that matter.”

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IF WE ARE to summarize the relations between the metaphorical phrase “zone of uninhabitation,” the body, the “law,” and the possibility of agency, or between theories of Judith Butler, Julia Kristeva, Mary Douglas, and, eventually, Isaiah Berlin, the following issues ought to be pointed out. Driven by her political engagement in the fight for the legal rights of marginal genders (a struggle that is completely in accordance with the classical liberal tradition and values that Berlin argues for), Butler theoretically produces the concept of citation of the “law” in order to open the way for effective political action. By assuming that the “law” is an emanation of supreme power that can be opposed only from within its own operational framework, Butler needs to (a) temporalize the “law,” and (b) make it dependent on its own effects. She manages to achieve these theoretical goals by developing the concept of citation through its three aspects: performativity, reiteration, and abjection.

It is obvious that the third aspect – abjection – is of greatest importance considering the salvation of the possibility of agency within the framework of the theories of social constructivism. According to Butler’s theory, abject beings as well as recognized subjects are repeatedly and simultaneously produced through the same performative act of the “law”; therefore, there is nothing that precedes the “law.” If we are to find weak

spots in Butler's theory, I am inclined to argue that this is one of them. A thorough examination of Butler's assumptions points out that, eventually, she maintains the distinction between the real biological body and the social body, the body as it is represented and used in specific ways (I cannot see another way of understanding Butler's phrase "a founding prohibition that prohibits a certain desire").<sup>12</sup> Therefore I felt a need to introduce Julia Kristeva's theoretical insights in my work. Kristeva developed the concept of abjection through its relation to the body, and within Kristeva's theory it is possible to equate the body with the metaphorical phrase "zone of uninhabitation." On the other hand, Butler's use of the term "law" has some mystical connotations and therefore it seemed to me that it would be of some help if I introduce the term "thought style," construed and developed by Mary Douglas, as an equivalent of Butler's "law."

This is the theoretical framework within which I try to interpret two particular works of literature. These interpretations have a double goal. On the one hand, they are intended to be a kind of additional proof for the theoretical assumptions and insights examined in this chapter. On the other hand, they are intended to demonstrate that some theoretical issues, viewed as problems within the narrower framework of literary criticism, could be approached, explained and resolved within broader theoretical contexts, and

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<sup>12</sup> It is interesting that my conclusion about Butler's theoretical views concerning the body is exactly the same as Butler's conclusion about Foucault's theoretical insights. Namely, in her early essay about the paradox of the body in Foucault's *History of Sexuality. Vol. I*, Butler wrote that, although Foucault maintains that the body is literally produced by discursive power, there are some metaphors in his writings that suggest that he assumed that there is a body before the "law," the body that precedes and opposes the "law."

**in this particular case – within the context of Judith Butler’s theorizing on subject and identity.**

## II

### 3. AN INTERLUDE:

“IF I RAISE A HAND... WHERE WILL MY HAND GO?”

THE TITLE of this “interlude” is, in fact, almost the whole story that I am going to analyze here. The complete story, written by the Serbian-Jewish writer David Albahari, goes like this:

If I raise a hand, he said, where will my hand go? (David Albahari, *Fras u šupi*, Beograd: Rad, 1984, p. 56)

The title of the story is “The Koan of the Story.” That is all.

Many questions, of course, can be asked about this short text by Albahari. Obviously one might begin by asking: Is this really a story? What makes it a story? What is it about? What happens in it (the question related to the common and, one would say, valid assumption that in every story something should happen)? What does it mean? How can it be interpreted? In other words: What can one do with this short sentence that the author presents as a story? Or, to put it another way: What does this short sentence presented as a story do?

The last question makes it obvious that I intend to approach Albahari’s text from a more precisely defined standpoint – the particular standpoint of the reader as defined in the theory of “reader response

criticism." Thus, it seems that I shall try to answer the following questions: How does this sentence make me think that it *is* the story? Moreover, how does it make me think it is a good story worth analyzing? Partly relying on the interpretative procedure established by Stanley Fish, I will try to answer these questions, but before I begin to analyze the story I am going to explain in what way I shall use the interpretative method established by "reader response criticism."

Stanley Fish's interpretative theory can be divided in two parts. First, Fish defines the conditions of communication and understanding. We communicate, according to Fish, not because we "share a language, in the sense of knowing the meanings of individual words and the rules of combining them, but because a way of thinking, a form of life, shares us, and implicates us in a world of already-in-place-objects, purposes, goals, procedures, values, and so on; and it is to the features of that world that any words we utter will be heard as necessarily referring" (Fish 1980: 303-4). As members of a so-called "interpretative community" we speak, Fish claims, "*from within* a set of interests and concerns, and it is in relation to those interests and concerns" that we can assume that we will understand each other (Fish 1980: 303).

The very process of interpretation and understanding of texts Fish grounds in his explanation of the process of reading:

In an utterance of any length, there is a point at which the reader has taken in only the first word, and then the second, and then the third, and so on, and the report of what happens to the reader is always a report of

what has happened to that point. (The report includes the reader's set toward future experiences, but not those experiences.)<sup>13</sup>

This means that the reader understands the word or the words she or he has already read by trying to guess what will come next in the text. Although it will often turn out that the reader's surmises are false, they still remain part of the meaning of the text. In other words, the sequence of the reader's mostly false surmises actually constitutes the meaning of the text.

However, as M. H. Abrams demonstrates in his essay "How to Do Things with Texts,"<sup>14</sup> one has to follow Fish's instructions only to a certain extent in order to establish a relevant – one would say valid – interpretation. Abrams argues that Fish himself reads in a way slightly different from the one he actually prescribes. That is, Fish's procedure of construing the meaning of the text is always preceded by the previous reading of the whole text and it is grounded in his knowledge relevant for the understanding of the chosen text. In other words, Abrams foregrounds that the choice of the points in the text where Fish stops to guess what will come next shows that he already has certain notions about the whole text and that that is the reason why he manages to choose exactly those points that are really relevant for the already, although tacitly, established meaning of the text.

In the following paragraphs I am going to construe "The Koan of the Story" by using Fish's "start-stop strategy," in a way that Fish himself,

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted from Abrams 1991: 282-3.

<sup>14</sup> M. H. Abrams "How to do Things with the Texts," in *Doing Things with Texts*, edited by Michael Fischer (New York, 1989).

as Abrams describes, actually uses it, thus taking into account some of the possible surmises and particularly emphasizing the existing tension between false guesses and the final meaning of the story. I am also going to contextualize the story to demonstrate how its meaning or significance can be changed according to different contexts, or, to use Fish's terms, "ways of thinking" or "forms of life" that form "interpretative communities."

## I

THE STORY, to say it again, goes like this:

David Albahari

"The Koan of the Story"

If I raise a hand, he said, where will my hand go?

### *First: the author*

DAVID ALBAHARI is one of the best Serbian writers of short stories. He is especially well known for his extremely short stories. Thus, a reader familiar with Serbian fiction would not be surprised to find a one-line-story under the name of David Albahari. Furthermore, Albahari's fiction can be described as a good example of the stream in contemporary Serbian narrative literature that is often called "postmodernist fiction," or "metafiction." Among other things (as far as Serbian literature is concerned, "other" in this context implies certain very negative connotations and values if it comes from so-called conservative critics), these labels mean



that it is fiction written by authors very well aware of theoretical and poetic issues in writing and reading literature. In the case of David Albahari this is confirmed by Albahari's many essays and interviews on the poetics of short stories. Thus, noticing Albahari's name above the story, the reader can suppose that there is a good reason why Albahari presents one short sentence as the complete story.

*Second: the title*

THE READER associates the first term in the title – “koan” – with a very specific genre and tradition of Zen. Thus, it is possible to read the first word of the story's title as an explicit instruction about how to read the rest of the story. The koan is “a nonsensical or paradoxical question posed to a Zen student as a subject for meditation, intended to help the student break free of reason and develop intuition in order to achieve enlightenment” (*Random House Webster's Dictionary*). However, the reader will be surprised by the next word of the title – “story.” The term “story” has the same function as the term “koan.” It is also the name of a specific genre with its own tradition. In a way, the reader is told to read the sentence as a koan as well as a story. The problem is that the meanings of these two terms are mutually exclusive in a certain way. A koan is definitely not a story, and, the other way around, one would say that any text pretending to be a story must consist of more than one simple question (to put it simply, it should have a beginning, a middle, and an end).

Furthermore, the connection between the two words in the title is ambivalent, because of the various meanings of the preposition “of” which

relate the two words to each other. On the one hand, it is possible to say that the content of the story will be “a nonsensical or paradoxical question,” that is, the question is placed within the story as a part of it. On the other hand, we can understand the relations between the words in the title as a comment on the story as a koan, that is, the story as such is a kind of a riddle posed to the reader. The title suggests that the whole story is in a way “nonsensical and paradoxical,” considering the common notion of what a story should be, which implies that the reader should break free of the usual meaning of the term “story” in order to understand the text in a proper way. Thus, one can say that in the title we can find the trace of an unstable hierarchy: at the same time the word “koan” is in a way subordinated to the word “story,” and, the other way around, the “story” is subordinated to the “koan.” All these meanings have to be taken into account when construing the story.

### *Third: the story*

BECAUSE OF THE TERM “koan” the reader will not be surprised by the question: “If I raise a hand... where will my hand go?” The title prepares the reader for this question – for the “nonsensical and paradoxical question.” However, when considering only the “koan,” the middle part of the sentence – “he said” – is completely redundant. If the koan is a genre defined as the question posed to the student by the Zen teacher, it is not necessary to add “he said.” Yet, again, this is not only the koan, this is, at the same time, the story, and that is the reason why one can ask the

following questions: Who is "he"? Why "said" instead of, for example, "asked"? "Said" to whom: student, himself, psychiatrist, reader?

"He said" is the break in the sentence. It divides the sentence into two parts. The first part of the sentence – "If I raise a hand..." – is completely understandable in a way that nothing strange happens. We can ask, of course, many questions, such as: Who is "I"? Where is "I"? Whom does "I" talk to? – but those questions are ordinary, and we can ask them almost every time we start to read a story. Then, after the first half of the question there is a pause, and then comes a complete change of the situation – "... where will my hand go?" In the first part it looks as if the hand is a part of the speaker's body, and that he can control his limbs: it seems this is the only way we can understand the first part of "I"'s conditional utterance about "raising a hand." On the contrary, in the last part it seems he cannot control his body and that if he moves he will fall apart. It looks like this change occurs during the pause of "he said." "He" implies that there is a certain kind of identity of the "I" or the speaker. At least the speaker is not "she," but "he." However, in the last part of the sentence this identity is challenged as soon as it is established. This challenging of the speaker's identity is emphasized by the word "my." In the first part we have just "a hand." It is implied that it is the speaker's hand. But in the last part a kind of process of disintegration is suggested by treating the hand as an autonomous subject that can move independently of the speaker's will and intention, and this – speaker's uncertainty about his own body – is underlined by his need to say "my hand." In fact, it is not obvious any more

that it is really his hand, as we have presupposed when reading the first part of the sentence.

We can conclude that at the same time when the speaker's identity is established by the pronoun "he," the process of "his" disintegration and loss of identity begins. And this is the elementary "plot" of the story. This is what happens in the story. And the narrator tells us this story by using the koan – the nonsensical and paradoxical question. And s/he tells us this story in a way that is also nonsensical and paradoxical, that is, in a way which challenges the usual notions of story-telling, as well as of the narrator.

## II

IT IS POSSIBLE to say that this story on both levels – on the level of the question and on the level of the story – challenges our notions of certainty and identity. Here, one could ask why I think it is possible to understand this story in this way. The answer is: I read it within particular contexts.

First of all, I am thinking of Ludwig Wittgenstein's book *On Certainty* as an appropriate ground for understanding "The Koan of the Story." The opening sentence of Wittgenstein's book is:

1. If you do know that *here is one hand*, we'll grant you all the rest.

(Wittgenstein 1969: 7)

By this sentence Wittgenstein challenges G. E. Moore's "defense of common sense" based on the assumptions that he knows some propositions for sure, such as "Here is one hand, and here is another." Wittgenstein

claims that there is no significant difference between “knowing” and “being certain” and points out that being certain is, in fact, a matter of appropriate usage of language. “I may be sure of something,” Wittgenstein writes, “but still know what test might convince me of error” (Wittgenstein 1969: 66). However, if the procedure of testing is not established in language, and we still know that something is wrong, that puts in question all our beliefs.

68. Could we imagine a man who keeps on making mistakes where we regard a mistake is ruled out, and in fact never encounter one?  
(Wittgenstein 1969: 75)

[...]

70. For months I have lived at address A, I have read the name of the street and the number of the house countless times, have received countless letters here and given countless people the address. If I am wrong about it, the mistake is hardly less than if I were (wrongly) to believe I was writing Chinese and not German.

71. If my friend were to imagine one day that he had been living for a long time past in such and such a place, etc. etc., I should not call this a mistake, but rather a mental disturbance, perhaps a transient one.  
(Wittgenstein 1969: 75)

The point is that we can imagine that someone can be wrong in a way that Wittgenstein describes, but then not know how to cope with it because language does not provide appropriate tools for such circumstances. Therefore, we can ask: does the following question make any sense within the existing language order:

9. Now do I, in the course of my life, make sure I know that here is a hand  
– my own hand, that is? (Wittgenstein 1969: 13)

And the answer would be that it probably does not make sense, but we can still imagine the situation in which we can ask such a question. This question's meaning is parallel to the meaning of the question in Albahari's story. It is nonsensical and paradoxical exactly because it is out of the usual order and common sense established by language usage. It is also interesting to notice parallelism between the uses of "my" in both questions. The point is that if such questions do not make sense in the existing language order, does it mean that they do not make sense at all? We can say that they lead the reader to the linguistic border: they are verbalized within a language (that is the only way, after all), but their meaning cannot be defined within this same language. To demonstrate this, it is enough to ask: What does it mean that someone does not know where her or his hand would go if s/he raises it? What does it mean that a hand can go (independently)?

### III

HOWEVER, it is possible to say that such a questioning of certainty does not jeopardize the notion of identity. Yet, Wittgenstein writes that

4. "I know that I am a human being." In order to see how unclear the sense of this proposition is, consider its negation. At most it might be

taken to mean "I know I have the organs of a human." (Wittgenstein 1969: 7)

Thus, knowing that I *am* a human being implies, at least, that I have the organs of a human. Furthermore, one can say that it implies that I have organs organized as the organism. Finally, it implies that I can control my organs, at least my limbs, since they are organized into an organism in a certain way. Talking about the need for establishing the theory of techniques of the body in his famous short essay "Les Techniques du corps" published in 1936, the French anthropologist Marcel Mauss asserted that there are traditional effective techniques of the body through which human beings learn how to use their bodies. Beginning with a specific description of swimming and diving techniques, Mauss comes to the general conclusion that there is no such thing as natural behavior. The idea of the organs unified into the organism through particular techniques calls to mind Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's essay about "a body without organs," in their book *A Thousand Plateaus*.<sup>15</sup> For them, the organism is one of the main obstacles which persons face when trying "to 'find themselves'" (Deleuze and Guattari: 156).

Let us consider the three great strata concerning us, in other words, the ones that most directly bind us: the organism, signification, and subjectification. The surface of the organism, the angle of signification and

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<sup>15</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, "November 28, 1947: How Do You Make Yourself a Body without Organs?," in *A Thousand Plateaus*, 149-66.

interpretation, and the point of subjectification or subjection. You will be organized, you will be an organism, you will articulate your body – otherwise you're just deprived. You will be signifier and signified, interpreter and interpreted – otherwise you're just a deviant. You will be a subject, nailed down as one, a subject of the enunciation recoiled into a subject of the statement – otherwise you're just a tramp. (Deleuze and Guattari: 159)

It is obvious that here Deleuze and Guattari have in mind Lacan's concept of the mirror stage in the child's development, that is, the stage when the child acquires the so called schema of her or his unified body. Through acquiring this "schema" or "image" the child gets the notion of her or his own identity and becomes capable to use the pronoun "I." The point is that this schema or image, as Lacan stresses it, is actually fictive, unreal. Moreover, in this way the symbolic order is imposed on the child. And it is only through this order that s/he can express herself or himself as a subject or "I." Forming a body without organs, that is, by disintegrating the organism, one is capable of experiencing something real, beyond language or symbolic order.

Thus, we can read Albahari's story as an account of the process of one's deliberate disintegration in order to reach something real. And that is exactly the meaning of the koan: the process of breaking free of reason or symbolic order and of developing intuition in order to achieve enlightenment. We can relate this meaning to the previous one and say that "The Koan of the Story" tells us about a possible disintegration of the



identity of "he" through the disintegration of "his" body as the only way for "him" to step out of the symbolic order and achieve enlightenment.

#### IV

THERE IS ONE MORE MEANING of this story, which is particularly important in the context of contemporary Serbian fiction. As I suggested, writing about the author of the story, some critics of Serbian literature object that postmodernist writers do nothing but experiment with narrative forms, that they do not try to say anything relevant about society or life experience. In other words, these critics imply that there is no good reason for reading this kind of fiction, because the reader cannot find anything that s/he could be interested in. Underneath such objections, there is the tacit accusation that postmodernist writers are not engaged in the discussion of social issues, namely in criticism of the social system of the former Yugoslavia.

That this is not true can be shown even on the example of this short story. During the 1970s and 1980s a system of "socialist," or "workers'" "self-management" was established in Yugoslavia. Nominally, it put workers in a position to make their own decisions about their jobs and the factories they worked in. Directors were supposed only to realize their decisions. Decisions were made by voting, by raising hands. There were many means by which politicians and directors could manipulate workers' votes, particularly because voting was not secret but public. Thus, if we understand "raising a hand" as a means of voting in the first part of the sentence, and "my hand" as a metonymic replacement of "my vote" in the

last part, it is obvious that this story alludes to the great possibility of manipulating the workers' votes. "He" in this case could be a worker who considers the reasons for taking part in an obvious fraud.

\* \* \*

IS ALL OF THIS too much for such a short story? Probably it is. However, the point is that this story does not constrain the reader's response by its brevity. On the contrary, it is exactly its brevity that causes the reader's impression that something is lacking, which forces her or him to search for its meaning by placing it in different contexts. On the other hand, the story's complexity, the particular tension between the possible meanings of the parts of the story taken one by one and as a whole, serves as a firm ground for the different contextualizations of "The Koan of the Story."

### **III**

#### 4. THE HYSTERIC VERSUS THE HERMENEUTIC CIRCLE

AS WE COULD SEE in the interlude, an apparently simple question can be read as a complete story within a particular context, or, in Fish's terms, within a particular "form of life." Within the context of theorizing about the relationship between the subject's identity and its body, what at first seemed unacceptable as a story, having no beginning, middle or end, turned out to be a complete story in the classical terms of Aristotelian poetics. The same method of interpretation will be used in the reading of Judita Šalgo's novel *The Road to Birobidžan*. However, the interpretative problem that this book presents the readers with is of a different kind. Here, we are talking about an unfinished novel that ought to be read as complete.

##### I

ONE OF THE MAJOR HERMENEUTIC RULES foregrounds the relation between the text as a whole and its specific parts. This relation allows us to interpret the text through a twofold process: we can understand the whole text by understanding its parts, and we can understand its parts by understanding the whole text. No one of these two complementary readings dominates the other, and, in spite of our reading experience, it is taken that they are simultaneous. Both readings are necessary for the establishment of a valid

interpretation. Taking into account this rule, it is easy to claim that we can interpret and understand only those texts that are completed. In other words, texts that are unfinished prevent an interpreter from closing the hermeneutic circle. However, literary history offers a number of examples of unfinished works that were and still are the focus of literary criticism, which demonstrates that 'unfinished' does not necessarily have to mean 'incomplete'.

In contemporary Serbian fiction Judita Šalgo's novel *The Road to Birobidžan* is particularly interesting in this respect. Judita Šalgo died before she managed to finish the novel. According to her statements given shortly before she died, she managed to write half of her novel. Furthermore, only half of the written manuscript was ready for publishing. Judita Šalgo published two completed chapters in literary periodicals, and two chapters remained finished and unpublished until she died; immediately after her death these two chapters were also published. This means that only one quarter of the whole novel was ready to be offered to the readers. Yet, a careful reader could easily conclude that Judita Šalgo left her manuscript at a stage when she still thought about several possible versions of some apparently completed parts of the novel. In spite of this, I am inclined to argue that we can approach Judita Šalgo's *The Road to Birobidžan* as a completed work of literature.

To explain my inclination I will discuss Šalgo's novel on two levels. The first one is the level of the novel's structure; the second is the thematic level. It could easily be argued that *The Road to Birobidžan* was supposed to have an embedded (ring like) narrative structure. The story about the

Novi Sad family Rot, unfolding in the aftermath of the Second World War encompasses several stories: the story about the poet Nenad Mitrov, the story about the American branch of the Rot family tree (both stories begin prior to the Second World War, and they end in the narrative time of the overarching story), and the most voluminous story, about Bertha Pappenheim (one could say, a novel within a novel), which covers a time span of four decades – from the final decade of the 19th century to the 1930s.

The embedded structure of the novel is repeated at the level of the structure of the individual chapters: the story about Nenad Mitrov encompasses the stories about the Russian emigree Maria Alexandrovna and the Soviet revolutionary Larisa Reisner, and the story about the Rosenbergs is inserted into the American Rot family story.

The important characters in the novel, with the exception of Maria Alexandrovna, are Jewish.

The central motif in all the parts of the novel – with the exception of the Bertha Pappenheim story, where the motif of the “women’s continent” performs the same function – is the “Autonomous Jewish Region of Birobidžan.” This motif is the knot of all lines of narration and meaning. As both sides of the utopian image of the land once promised to the chosen people, as a New Jerusalem that the protagonists are obsessively seeking, as a refuge for the poor, the disfigured, for those who are scared, marginalized, terminally ill – Birobidžan stands at the beginning, as a distant goal, and at the end, as redemption unachieved, of the motivation sequences of the novel. Therefore, every attempt at interpretation ought to explain the

symbolic place of Birobidžan in the semantic structure of the novel. The semantically privileged, or, hierarchically superior position of this motif (when compared to other elements of the novel), is confirmed by the introductory "Song on Birobidžan," serving as a dramatic prologue which introduces the protagonists and suggests the subject of the novel.

The novel is mostly narrated in the third person. We have here an omniscient, reliable narrator, who tells the story consistently to the very end, using the realist technique most of the time. What is specific to this narration, however, is that close to the end of both chapters, as well as to the end of the novel itself, the narrative situation changes: the previously all-encompassing perspective of the narrator is reduced to the perspectives of individual characters, and the realist narrative framework disintegrates into a fantastic one.

The chapter on lost tribes ends with the statements by witnesses which were, the narrator tells us, "to a certain extent mutually exclusive and did not contribute to a solution of the case" (Šalgo 1997: 60). The narrator herself/himself does not intervene in this instance, although the privileged position of the all-knowing one should certainly have offered her/him the possibility to tell us what had actually happened. Thus the case of the disappearance of Dora Levin, the primary protagonist in the story about the unsolved mystery of "lost" tribes, remains unexplained.

Another important characteristic of Judita Šalgo's narration is the technique of giving individual, temporally and spatially circumscribed events general meaning which is in contrast with the above-mentioned device of shifting the narrative perspective from the omniscient to the

limited one belonging to an individual character. Therefore, it is possible to say that the end of every narrative unit is characterized by this shift in narration, from omniscient to a limited perspective, and the disintegration of the realist narrative framework into a fantastic one, but also by the technique of giving universal meaning to temporally and spatially defined events. This technique is similar to the technique used in filmmaking when a close-up is followed by a panoramic shot without a cut in the scene. This narrative device, however, does not have to be presented only on the level of visual images: at the end of the story about lost tribes, the disappearance of Dina Levin is reason enough for one of the protagonists to conclude that the whole world is lost.

Finally, one could say that there is reason enough to speak about the formal and thematic wholeness of the novel. On the one hand, the repetition of the ring-like pattern and the shift in the narrative situation at the end of every narrative unit allows us to establish the narrative pattern of Judita Šalgo's novel. On the other hand, it is not likely that any significant thematic divergences might occur. For example, according to Šalgo's notes, the protagonists of one of the unwritten chapters should have been the Rosenbergs. From a parenthetical remark we learn that the "secret plan to send the Rosenbergs to Birobidžan" (Šalgo 1997: 64) was supposed to function as an element of the plot, which is logical, since: "All roads to Birobidžan lead through prisons, police quarters etc." (Šalgo 1997: 64). Thus, we can claim thematic wholeness for the novel with some certainty.



## II

AT THE FIRST GLANCE, perhaps because of the numerous comments, most of which would probably not be included in the final version of the novel, it seems that *The Road to Birobidžan* opens up to interpretation and understanding with no difficulty. For example, it is easy to associate the embedded ring-like structure with the explanation of the initial O. from Bertha Pappenheim's pseudonym:

The name Anna O. is a synonym for a large, cosmic hysteric circle (from which there is no exit), hysteric whirlpool, that draws and sucks in the world. (Šalgo 1997: 103)

What the narrative ring of the novel has "sucked in," are the rings from the novel's embedded structure, the rings that in turn "suck in" other rings, and in each ring, as in a whirlpool, a world is disappeared, a world in which the destitute, the disfigured, the disenfranchised and the sick are trying in vain to leave the circle from which there is no exit. But, even if there was a way out of it, if, through some miracle, a way out would be shown to them, a way out of their own story, their own ring, they would only find themselves trapped in another ring. Or, in the words of Sara Alkalaj:

At these fatal points, it will turn out, whichever bend may already have been overtaken, whichever rock already climbed, one will come to see the same scenery, the same terrain that he had just passed through. No matter how far one goes, the same vista will open up before one's eyes. So he

keeps climbing the same rock he had already climbed, and after every bend he keeps coming down to the same gorge he had just come out of.  
(Šalgo 1997: 173-4)

But, is that everything? Does Judita Šalgo talk only of cripples and the terminally ill who wander from place to place in search of a refuge? If the stories about Nenad Mitrov and prostitutes with syphilis fit into this model, the story of the American branch of the Rot family tree definitely does not. Bertha Pappenheim also manages to escape these prescriptions, and so do Larisa Reisner, Flora Gutman and Haim Azriel. What forces these characters to keep looking for Birobidžan? Is Birobidžan simply a promised land where a great Healing would take place? Here is a list of possible meanings of Birobidžan:

A women's continent or an island?

Birobidžan is an unknown, repressed core of the human self (the subconscious?)... The embodiment, the earthly recreation, the core of neurosis.

Birobidžan is a country where there is no murder. This is a dream of a man (woman) who killed an old Arab in fear, without a reason.

Birobidžan is a madhouse.

Birobidžan is the FINAL SOLUTION (Hitler's secret plan in the attack on USSR).

Birobidžan as an ideal city (utopia).

Birobidžan as a homeland one keeps "just in case."

Birobidžan as a swampland, breeding ground for Jewish semen  
(A New Zion?).

Birobidžan – the last refuge (on Earth) of active magical thinking  
and living. (Šalgo 1997: 63)

It is obvious that all the meanings listed cannot be subsumed under one, comprehensive meaning. Even if they are not mutually exclusive, they do not converge. But, since each and every one of them becomes functional in one part of the novel, none should be neglected. So, instead of reinforcing the interpretation that seemed graspable for a moment, the series of explanations of what Birobidžan is does exactly the opposite: it makes the text impenetrable with its polisemy. However, maybe it is exactly this polysemy that makes it possible for us to make some advances in the understanding of *The Road to Birobidžan*, rather than putting an end to all interpretation.

What kind of a polysemy are we dealing with? If this was just an arbitrary attribution of meanings, the impression of the completeness of the novel would not be possible. Had that been the case, the novel would break down into separate stories, and there would be as many stories as there are different, independent meanings arbitrarily assigned to the same sign-symbol. But, since that is not the case, the novel, although unfinished, leaves the impression of a complete whole, and we have to come to a conclusion that there is something more to it than some arbitrary, unmotivated polysemy.

Therefore, the next question ought to be: is there after all a meaning that could encompass all other different meanings of Birobidžan? And, consequently, on which level can Birobidžan and the “women’s continent” be synonyms, meaning the same thing, performing the same function? Birobidžan is, in the narrative world of Judita Šalgo, “an unknown, repressed core of the human self,” and a “women’s continent” has:

[...] come out from Bertha’s excited brain as a warning or a prophecy before embarking on a dangerous journey, as a code/signifier of a long-forgotten starting point or an unclear, barely discernible goal... (Šalgo 1997: 74)

So, on the level of the unconscious as well as the subconscious, all other meanings of Birobidžan and women’s continent can finally converge, be unified – and it is hysteria that calls them into conscience and makes them real. Similar to the claim of the author of *Interpretation of Dreams* that the whole diversity of the problem of conscience can be made visible only in the analysis of the process of thinking in hysteria, one could say that it is possible to understand the “whole diversity” of the phenomenon of Birobidžan in Judita Šalgo’s novel only after we have analyzed the “hysteric mechanism” and the way it operates.

In some of its characteristics, the space in *The Road to Birobidžan* is significantly different from real space. “The travellers” to Birobidžan move in a space that has some qualities of the human psyche. Just like the psyche is split into the conscious and the unconscious, this space, we could say, is

divided into areas of the real and the imaginary. We should, however, keep in mind that the area of the "imaginary" is no less real in the world of the novel than the area of "real" itself. This division into the "real," geographic space, and the "imaginary" space of Birobidžan or the women's continent corresponds in all aspects to the division of the psyche into the areas of the conscious and the unconscious. All other spatial relations in the novel are subordinated to this division. That is why, in the world of the novel, sentences like

Women's continent is "there" where Mrs. Frank is going, and where women are sailing to, and "here." To be here and there at the same time. That is the secret of women's illness. And of the Women's continent. (Šalgo 1997: 156)

make sense, while, in the world outside the novel, they would be absurd.

The coordinates of the real and the imaginary space cannot be determined within the world of the novel, as if it were something that is "here" or "there," or "up" or "down." Just as Freud claimed that it is erroneous to speak about the conscious and the unconscious as if they were two separate and defined locations within the psyche, the idea of the real and the imaginary as two separate locations within the fictional world of *The Road to Birobidžan* is also erroneous. Much more appropriate than the spatial, i.e. the static mode of representing this fictional world, is the dynamic, expressed in the syntagm "moving, wandering (exodus) while remaining in one place" (Šalgo 1997: 63). The word "moving" is also used

only conditionally here. The characters of Judita Šalgo's novel can travel in two significantly different ways. One corresponds to the standard meaning of the word "travel." The other way to move, travel, or to go on a journey is – hysteria. The journey of Bertha Pappenheim across the Balkans to Alexandria, the narrator tells us

[...] occurs on two levels: the first is utilitarian, pragmatic – it leaves a trace, it can be read in her letters collected and published by *Sisyphus Arbeit* in Leipzig in 1924; and the other is hysteric, it is, we could say, the journey of Bertha's womb, the last journey, on which that womb is questioning itself, summarizing the decades of its travels... (Šalgo 1997: 149)

In the hierarchy of values of the fictional world of *The Road to Birobidžan*, travelling that occurs on the first level is significantly 'below' the travelling that occurs on the second level, meaning – hysteria. Only hysteria offers the most significant knowledge, discoveries, emotions; only a hysteric journey makes possible an understanding of the world and of the self (Šalgo 1997: 107). Travelling on the first level is always a one-way process, the traveller and the world remain unaffected by each other, unchanged, as if they had never met. On the other hand, travelling on the second, other level is a two-way process. It can also be represented as Bertha's abandoning or breaking of the "customary idea of the world," and as a "hysteric incursion of the world into her" (Šalgo 1997: 107). Hysteria is fraught with ambiguity: strongly tied to two different worlds, it connects them, yet at the same time,

it does not belong to either of them. Hysteria is the quivering of the porous membrane of the subconscious, which separates, yet at the same time also allows two different worlds to permeate each other. "The hysteric incursion" is the penetration of Birobidžan into the "real" world, but also the removal of the protagonists from the real world into the "imaginary" world.

However, the analogy between Freud's idea of the conscious and the unconscious on the one hand, and the "real" and the "imaginary" space in the fictional world of *The Road to Birobidžan*, on the other, is only partially valid. Quite on the contrary, although there is no doubt that Freud's division of the psyche into the areas of the conscious and the unconscious did serve as an organizing principle in the construction of the fictional world of *The Road to Birobidžan*, in some important instances and points in the story, Judita Šalgo disregards or even distorts some of Freud's most significant conclusions, just like she changes the facts of Bertha Pappenheim's biography.

"Why did Anna O. appear thirty years ago? What did that part of her personality want to achieve with that appearance? What was the message of its hysteria?" wonders the narrator in a chapter titled "The Secret Life of Bertha Pappenheim," and continues:

Breuer and Freud did not dwell on this. They accepted the message of therapy that Bertha Pappenheim left on their hands. Anna O. certainly had her task, mission even, otherwise she would never let out a word, she wouldn't have manifested herself. What did she want to tell the world?

What to create or destroy? To call the scientific world's, and the wider public's attention to or away from something? Breuer and Freud obscured things, they led things to their advantage and Anna followed them – it seemed to her she did this for her own good – but she forgot her message, the message of her illness. (Šalgo 1997: 103)

The main narrative elements in this excerpt are grouped around the character of Bertha Pappenheim: she is the person who has a mission, who carries a message, and who, finally, becomes prevented from the fulfillment of that task. One could also say that Breuer and Freud are nothing but peripheral characters whose characterization is reduced to a few strokes: they do not dwell on details in their work, they come to important conclusions by pure chance, but even on those occasions they miss the most important things, therefore they try to obscure things, having solely their own interests in mind. To continue along these lines, we could conclude that their only function is to prevent Bertha Pappenheim from delivering her message to the world, and once they have done that, there is no more reason for them to appear in the novel again.<sup>16</sup> Finally, their

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<sup>16</sup> In the novel, Freud appears again as a character whose action, to some extent, influences the course of narrated events. On this occasion, Martha Freud is attributed with telling her friend Bertha Pappenheim that her husband writes to her about not exactly yearning to come home, which he calls his beloved prison. She compared him to Antaeus, who loses his strength when he is close to his home, and acquires it as soon as he is away from it. But in spite of this, she says, he always comes back. Then comes the sentence: "Unlike Freud, Bertha herself **HAD NO STRENGTH** to leave her hometown of Vienna forever, and Freud was indirectly responsible for this" (Šalgo 1997: 72; capitals mine).

**HAD NO STRENGTH** in the quoted sentence, I strongly believe, should be **HAD STRENGTH**, and I believe this is either a typing mistake made in the retyping of the text, or perhaps even an omission on the part of the author herself. Only in this case the beginning of the sentence ("Unlike Freud...")



characterization seems to be reflective of what they are supposed to be doing: they are superficial, possess average intellectual abilities and they are occupied with themselves mostly, so it is only logical that they “obscure things,” that they lead things to their advantage, and thereby force Anna O. to forget her message. Still, this is too simplified to be correct.

I would say that this is one of the key parts of the novel – the only point at which both Breuer and Freud appear as active characters in the novel.<sup>17</sup> Having in mind that the main protagonist of the largest part of the

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makes sense. Especially since the historical Bertha Pappenheim *did* leave Vienna in 1888, and moved to Frankfurt. Judita Šalgo mostly did not change similar biographical facts in the novel, and this is why she, on one occasion, speaks about the “self-sacrificing, rational lady from Frankfurt” (Šalgo 1997: 66).

By the way, we cannot determine what Freud’s “responsibility” means here from what is narrated in the novel. It is possible, however, if this was really about leaving, and not remaining in Vienna, that the narrator is thinking about Freud’s version of the end of the curing process of Anna O., which is significantly different from what Breuer wrote in his *Studies on Hysteria*. Freud, unlike Breuer, thought that hysteria could hardly be considered apart and separately from sexual neuroses (Freud, Sigmund and Josef Breuer *Studies on Hysteria*, trans. James and Alix Strachey, Penguin Books /1974/, page 342). Since he did not have this in mind while trying to cure Anna O., Breuer was not able to successfully bring her cure to an end. Furthermore, this omission put Breuer in a situation where he was not able to control the relationship that developed between him and his patient. Freud later said that Breuer decided to stop the curing process when he started “feeling guilty” because of his wife. Breuer, however, in his report on the case of Anna O. writes that he successfully completed the curing process, and that the girl had fully recovered her health. In this report there is also no mention of the imaginary pregnancy of Anna O., which was key in Freud’s version of the whole case. With the ironic remark – “indirectly responsible,” the narrator adds another negative quality to Freud’s character in the novel: inclination to spread gossip.

<sup>17</sup> Of course, having in mind that this is an unfinished work, we should take the statement that certain characters appear only once in the novel with some reserve. What I mean to say is that we cannot know whether the finished manuscript would change something in this respect, that is, whether there would be other occasions of Freud and Breuer appearing in the text. Still, I believe that even in such a case, there would be no significant changes, compared to the original text – the text we have. I already said that based on what is accessible to us, we can speak with certainty about a formal and semantic completeness of *The Road to Birobidžan*, and then also about the

novel is Bertha Pappenheim, Breuer's patient who opened the way for psychoanalysis, it is somewhat strange that Breuer and Freud are not more represented within the novel. Their being left out is also surprising if we have in mind the fictional potential of the biographical material on the mutual relationships of these three people. By itself, this fact allows for certain conclusions. One of them would be: the story about the founders of psychoanalysis is a narrative stream that is deliberately held back, but whose traces the reader can still follow.

Based on numerous details that point to this, it is clear that Judita Šalgo was well read in psychoanalytic literature. This is why we cannot read the sentence in which the narrator is informing us that Breuer and Freud did not dwell much on Anna O.'s case as a simple accommodation of factual material to the structural needs of narration. If someone who is well informed about the emergence and the development of psychoanalysis, writes that Freud did not dwell on the case and that he was only interested in the therapy-aspect of the case, in spite of many of Freud's statements that mention the crucial importance of Anna O. for further conclusions about the functioning of the human psyche, then the conclusions must necessarily allow for something more serious than a simple accommodation of facts to the needs of the story. Because, if we suppose that the point was the prevention of Anna O. from completing her mission, the sequence in question could have been solved differently. However, something else is at stake here. What we have is a very clear value judgment. The narrator, in

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relatively stable place of Breuer and Freud in the semantic structure of the novel.

these few sentences, simply rejects psychoanalytic theory as that which "obscures things."

Another clue that points to this is the fact that there is no reason whatsoever to mention Breuer *and* Freud at this point in the novel. Anna O. was Breuer's patient. Freud learned of the case in its entirety only after the curing process was completed. Freud himself reproached Breuer for missing the opportunity to reach very important conclusions, out of respect for conventions. The claim that Bertha Pappenheim discovered how to eliminate the symptoms of hysteria herself is also not to be contested; Breuer could not do much but support her in those attempts. So, had the narrator mentioned only Breuer, and not both doctors, this would have been a simple adoption of material, without significant interventions. In other words, the only intervention the author made, when compared to the original material, concerns Freud – he is constructed to play a role that Breuer alone played in the real world.

Now we might answer the question: why is the theory that promotes the very principles that the fictional world of the novel rests upon, why is that theory presented as that which "obscures things"? Put more mildly, this question might become: what are the aspects of Freud's work that the author has accepted, and which of them did she, based on her own beliefs, want to reject? There is no doubt that the division between the conscious and the unconscious is never questioned; had this happened, the structure of the whole novel would have been disrupted, and the central motifs of

Birobidžan, the women's continent and hysteria would have been deprived of meaning.

The answer might be found in a careful reading of the excerpt about Bertha Pappenheim's curing treatment:

That cure (or "cure") from hysteria, actually put an end to her life. Everything stopped then. Oh that perverse Greek, who understood that hysteria is actually the womb's wandering through a woman's body! Her womb, Bertha's womb, had just matured and embarked on a journey, went off wandering with curiosity, convulsive and insolent, self-sufficient and rebellious – and without a goal! hysterically! – when she was suddenly and shrewdly stopped on the brink of her great adventure, her great life journey. So abandoned she stood, forgotten, restrained, confused and obstructed by illusory health for whole three decades. (Šalgo 1997: 93-4)

Although in his report Breuer wrote that Anna O. was cured, her illness kept returning to her, in a very serious form at that. This is why the narrator calls it the "cure" and also stresses Bertha Pappenheim's "illusory health." In this respect the facts of the fictional and of the real, historical world, coincide. However, at another point in the novel, Bertha's illness is described as "incurable, unknowable" (Šalgo 1997: 84). This is a serious departure from the historical material. Freud later analyzed the case of Anna O. to the smallest detail, offering among other things the reasons why Breuer could not cure his patient. Furthermore, Freud also strongly believed

that psychoneuroses were curable. Judita Šalgo knew this well. And still, the narrator stresses that this is an “incurable, unknowable hysteria.” Naturally, what is at stake here is not the scientific validity of Freud’s conclusions and explanations, so it would not make much sense to claim that Judita Šalgo rejected Freud’s postulations after carefully examining and studying the scientific subject herself. Had it been so, there would have been a trace of it in the text. On the contrary, the narrator insists on “incurability and unknowability” in general. And precisely this is the reason behind the rejection of Freud’s conclusions. What is at stake here is not their (in)correctness, but the very intention of the Viennese doctor to cure the “incurable,” to know the “unknowable.” In other words, what the narrator explicitly contests here is Freud’s determinism concerning the matters of psychic life. Because events want to “betray, deceive the record,” explains the narrator,

[...] events seek to not be written down, to be free, to float freely, wander through time and space, so that they can be attributed to one and the other, to here and there, to yesterday and tomorrow. (Šalgo 1997: 69)

The spaces of freedom in the novel are the “women’s continent,” the imaginary Birobidžan, and following the analogy, the area of the unconscious. Those are the locations of indeterminacy, and every attempt to introduce order into them is actually an act of violence, inhibition, betrayal. Only from this viewpoint can we understand why the cure of hysteria is at the same time an act of vacating, impoverishment, followed by the feeling

of defeat, of having been deceived, and used (Šalgo 1997: 109). Therefore “life without hysteria” is a “life without qualities,” “common life,” which excludes the real content of Bertha’s life and personality (Šalgo 1997: 109). By discovering a “location” of freedom, indeterminacy, or unlimited polisemy, Freud tried to introduce order into it, to set the rules, to limit the multiplicity of meanings, and that, from the viewpoint of the narrator of *The Road to Birobižan*, obscures the “most authentic knowledge of the world and of the *self*,” accessible only through a fit of hysteria (Šalgo 1997: 107). Because:

Dream and consciousness, birth and death, sexual intercourse and dying, all are just forms of a hysteric fit. The universe is hysterically bent, stooping. (Šalgo 1997: 107)

Thus it turns out that the “most authentic knowledge” is the awareness of the boundary between the speakable and the imaginable, on the one hand, and the unspeakable and the unimaginable on the other, – hysteria itself. Nothing can be said about the women’s continent, or about the imaginary Birobidžan, or for that matter about the unconscious, and thus nothing specific *should* be said about them; one can only speak about the experience of the boundary, and an awareness of it represents authentic knowledge. This is why Birobidžan can carry a variety of different meanings, and at the same time, no meaning in particular. That is why on the level of the novel that concerns the social activity of Bertha Pappenheim, that is, the messianic or utopian aspect of her public work, the

following sentence sounds like a final conclusion: "Now I know freedom is about self-denial, withdrawal, now I realize, the only utopia worth struggling for, worth living, is the utopia of total isolation, of the renunciation of positive utopia" (Šalgo 1997: 154).<sup>18</sup>

The death of Nenad Mitrov, the disappearance of Dina Levin, the fleeing forest, all of these events are supposed to remain unexplained, these are the border cases, a hysteric permeation of worlds, and that is why the realistic narrative framework has retreated before the fantastic one. These are the events that, also, want to "deceive the record," that want to remain "free, to float freely, wander through time and space," that seek to be "attributed to one and the other, to here and there, to yesterday and tomorrow," and on the narrative level this is suggested by a generalization of the narrative perspective.

Birobidžan is not a truth that can be repeated in the same form, and that is why it cannot be a subject of common knowledge. To cut across the space that is Birobidžan in order to establish an order of limited meanings, just like Freud's explanation of the unconscious, is necessarily followed by an exclusion, omission, censorship of authentic qualities, of the "real content of life and personality." This is only one step away from a view of language understood in Saussurian terms as the *clandestine* system of expressive signs, which builds its units by *constituting itself between two amorphous masses*.

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<sup>18</sup> The ironic comment about the social involvement of Bertha Pappenheim can be recognized in the name of the publisher – *Sisyphus Arbeit* – that published her letters from the journey "across the Balkans to Alexandria," the journey that "yielded no results" and that "will have no effect" (Šalgo 1997: 66).

### III

WRITING ABOUT THE CASE of Anna O. in her essay "Hysteria, Psychoanalysis, and Feminism," Dianne Hunter stresses – likewise the narrator of Šalgo's novel – that Dr. Breuer "never fully recognized the meaning of his encounter with Pappenheim." This statement could be understood in two ways. First, it seems that it is possible to say that Hunter merely repeats Freud's comment on the case of Anna O.: namely, Freud objected that in trying to cure Anna O. Breuer failed to recognize the phenomenon of transference that could have led him to the core of the new psychiatric method named psychoanalysis. Hunter writes:

When Freud began to uncover the role of transference love in hypnosis and psychoanalysis, and to stress the importance of the sexuality in neuroses, Breuer dissociated himself from his controversial colleague. Although Pappenheim had led the way to the unconscious through her invention of the "talking cure" and her dramatization of transference love in the doctor-patient relation, Breuer resisted the implications of their encounter. (Hunter 1997: 262)

However, this way of reading Hunter's claim could be seen as a kind of overreading or misinterpretation. Namely, Hunter specifies that both "Freud and Breuer offer an inadequate explanation for Pappenheim's linguistic symptom." It thus turns out – according to Hunter, as well as according to the narrator of the novel – that not only did Breuer never fully recognize the



meaning of his encounter with Pappenheim, but that both of them, Breuer and Freud, did not manage to provide a valid explanation for Pappenheim's linguistic symptom.

From this second possible reading of her claim one can infer that Hunter presupposes that the valid explanation of the linguistic symptom is more important than the recognition of transference: otherwise there would have been no reason to claim that both Breuer and Freud failed to provide the valid explanation of the case of Anna O. Now it is possible to ask, why is the linguistic symptom so important? And how is it related to the case of Anna O.'s hysteria?

Writing about "the blind spot of an old dream of symmetry," in her book *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Luce Irigaray defines hysteria as follows: "Hysteria is all she has left" (Irigaray 1985: 71). This is just one of a number of ironic comments and conclusions that Irigaray deduces – seemingly by the way – from her examination of Freud's writings about women. Irigaray's conclusion is preceded by an analysis of the woman's position within the framework of language. She claims that woman is subject to the norms of a signifying economy, she is an outsider, and therefore she cannot coin her own signifiers. "She borrows signifiers," Irigaray explains, "but cannot make her mark, or re-mark upon them" (Irigaray 1985: 71). This keeps her, Irigaray concludes, "deficient, empty, lacking, in a way that could be labelled 'psychotic': a *latent* but not actual psychosis, for want of a practical signifying system" (Irigaray 1985: 71). There is no way, according to Irigaray, in which woman can express her instincts. Her instincts are "in abeyance, in limbo, in vacuo" (Irigaray 1985:

71). Woman thus can choose either to censor her instincts completely, or to treat them as – convert them into – hysteria (Irigaray 1985: 72). Here Irigaray relies implicitly on Lacan's writings, as well as on Kristeva's. By "language" she obviously assumes the Lacanian symbolic order or the "law." As far as "her instincts" are concerned, it is possible to relate them to Kristeva's concept of *chora*. Since the symbolic order, or language, is by definition phallogocentric, if woman wants to be accepted and recognized as a subject within the established linguistic system, she ought to submit herself to this order, which means that she has to censor her indeterminacy and undecidability, that are in Kristeva's terms inherent to the state of *chora*, or to treat them as, or convert them into, hysteria. In this way hysteria becomes a means through which the woman can express herself by avoiding or undermining language or the symbolic order.

Dianne Hunter analyzes the case of Anna O. within the same Lacanian and Kristevian frameworks. She emphasizes that "linguistically constituted subjectivity ('I' versus 'you,' 'he' versus 'she,' and syntactical relations) is superimposed upon our rhythmical, corporeal rapport with the mother" (Hunter 1997: 265), and then continues,

Prior to our accession to the grammatical order of language, we exist in a dyadic, semiotic world of pure sound and body rhythms, oceanically at one with our nurturer. [...] Our sense of ourselves as separate beings, as "subjects," is bound up with our entry into the order of language in which speech becomes a substitute for bodily connection. The world we as

children enter is always already constituted and governed by the language. (Hunter 1997: 265)

Within such a theoretical framework, Hunter is able to establish the following interpretation of Bertha Pappenheim's hysteria:

A child reared in a family such as Bertha Pappenheim's makes her transition to speech as part of a process according to which she recognizes the father's privileged relation to the mother. In the order of language, "I" and "you" conceptualize and mark separate persons, as "she" and "he," "mother" and "father," differentiate genders and roles. (Hunter 1997: 265)

"In this light," Hunter concludes, "Bertha Pappenheim's linguistic discord and conversion symptoms, her use of gibberish and gestures as means of expression, can be seen as a regression from the cultural order represented by her father as an orthodox patriarch" (Hunter 1997: 266). However, it is not quite clear why Hunter uses the term "regression" in the previous claim. It is possible to say that Bertha Pappenheim, for example, avoids, or undermines, or subverts the existing "law" in order to express herself independently of the patterns that are imposed on her through the process of acquisition of language. Namely, it is not clear how the replacement of the mother tongue by the foreign languages in the case of Anna O. can be seen as a regression. Yet, it is possible to understand Hunter's term if one relates it to Kristeva's concept of *chora*.

According to Kristeva, *chora* is the prelinguistic stage in the development of a child, which precedes the mirror phase and the Oedipal phase. It is possible to describe *chora* as the chaotic state of shifting, undecidable impressions. There are no stable meanings and identities in *chora*. To establish stable meanings and identities it is necessary to split the chaotic continuum of *chora* into a sequence of definite parts. This splitting is done by language, or the symbolic order that is imposed on a continuum of shifting impressions. According to this, Hunter's term "regression" denotes a temporal backward movement to the stage of *chora*, that is, to the state of undecidable meanings and unstable identities. Such a movement can be seen as a subversive act that undermines the "law." Therefore it should be strictly controlled and constrained.

Writing about the "stories of the insane," Roy Porter claims that "the history of madness is the history of power" (Porter 1988: 39). Although it is rather dim, Porter's claim could be understood in the following way: since madness is something that stands out of, or on the very border of the symbolic order or the "law" and thus demonstrates the limits of the order that manifests itself as eternal and universal, madness becomes a matter of a continuous effort of defining and determining the boundaries. For example, if we define hysteria within the existing order, it loses its capability of being subversive and becomes an element of the already established system. And that is exactly what Freud tried to do, or at least he did within the imaginary world of Salgo's novel.

It seems that it is now possible to construe the full meaning of the quoted passage on Breuer and Freud. While it is easy to explain the explicit

accusation as far as Breuer is concerned, things are much more complicated in the case of Freud. However, one explanation seems plausible. In the fictional world of *The Road to Birobidžan* Freud represents – in fact, protects – the symbolic order. He blurs the message of Anna O. by introducing the concept of transference, translating thus the particular language of Bertha Pappenheim into the existing phallogocentric language of the established “law.” Bertha Pappenheim’s “hysteric” language enabled her to express her shifting impressions by undermining the stable meanings and identities of her “mother tongue.” Probably this was her message, and her mission – that it is possible to subvert the “law.” However, the “law” responded through Dr. Breuer and Dr. Freud by claiming Anna O. as insane. This may also explain Dr. Breuer’s astonishing fabrication of the successful treatment of Bertha Pappenheim. One just has to ask, whose health Dr. Breuer was concerned about: was he speaking about the recovery of Bertha Pappenheim or about the recovery of the “law” itself?

\* \* \*

ALTHOUGH IN ŠALGO'S NOVEL Freud and Breuer were explicitly accused of preventing Anna O. from delivering her message, and although they were ultimately presented as the defenders of the "law," at one moment the narrator claims that Anna O.'s mission was doomed to failure. How are we to understand this claim? Is it in contradiction to the accusations against Breuer and Freud? If it is true that Anna O.'s mission was doomed to failure, then the role Breuer and Freud have in the novel is not essential and it is rather insignificant: she would have failed regardless of who was curing her and how.

Within the theoretical framework that I chose as a ground for the interpretation of *The Road to Birobidžan*, the meanings of the two apparently opposite statements do not necessarily have to be in contradiction. It is possible to say that Anna O.'s resistance was of a kind that allowed Breuer and Freud to obscure her message and preclude her from fulfilling her mission. To put it precisely: her resistance was placed in the space of the imaginary and therefore predetermined to be unsuccessful. A hysteric resistance is a kind of resistance within the psyche that is not directed towards the external world. In terms of Šalgo's Bertha Pappenheim, it is "withdrawal," "the utopia of total isolation." In Butler's terms, psychic resistance is "located in a domain that is virtually powerless to alter the law that it opposes." For this resistance it is necessary that the "law" precedes it in its symbolic form, which means that in a specific way

it strengthen the "law." Eventually, these are the reasons why psychic resistance is "doomed to perpetual defeat."

Anna O.'s rebellion is a kind of rebellion of Kristeva's revolutionary subjects. A revolutionary subject opposes the world of univocal and discrete meanings by producing a language of multiple sounds and meanings. That is the way in which *The Road to Birobidžan*, by using particular narrative devices, affirms *two amorphous masses* between which a *clandestine* system of expressive signs builds its units and *constitutes itself*. Nevertheless, although this multiplicity of sounds and meanings – the affirmation of "two amorphous masses" – thwarts the "law" in its effects, it is inevitably subordinated to the "law." As Judith Butler puts it: if the multiplicity of shifting impressions "promotes the possibility of the subversion, displacement, or disruption of the paternal law, what meanings can those terms have if the Symbolic always reasserts its hegemony" (Butler 1990: 80), as a *clandestine* system of expressive signs, which builds its units by *constituting itself between two amorphous masses*?

## 6. FORMING THE IDENTITY OF I-NARRATOR IN SAMUEL BECKETT'S "THE UNNAMABLE"

IF "HE" FROM THE SHORT KOAN of the story by Albahari is only able to question his identity through questioning the ability to control his limbs, and if Anna O. tried and eventually failed to acquire her new identity, then Beckett's unnamable narrator succeeds in establishing himself as a subject different from those subjects hitherto produced by the "law." If this is the correct interpretation of Beckett's novel, then it turns out that *The Unnamable* can be read within the genre of the novel of formation. Read in a number of various contexts, Beckett's novel often proved to be nearly unapproachable. However, read in the context of discussions about body and identity, *The Unnamable* opens itself for more traditional readings.

### I.

WRITING ABOUT THE MEANS that an author can use "to impose his fictional world upon the reader" in his *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne Booth particularly pays attention to Laurence Sterne's novel *Tristram Shandy*. Arguing against some critics' objections that Sterne's novel, being a fragmented, incomplete, temporally disordered, discontinuous sequence of narrative units, lacks unity and wholeness, Booth states that the carefully designed "voice," or the character, of the narrator of Sterne's novel



provides the firm ground for the integrity of *Tristram Shandy's* fictional world. Nowadays, some forty years after the publication of Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, it is a common place to say that the characteristics of the narrator determine the nature of the narration and the narrative world. However, the poetics of contemporary narrative fiction in many ways challenge this common notion. A number of narrative strategies deployed by contemporary writers are direct consequences of the questioning of the narrator's dominant position within the narrative world. Yet, it seems that the analytic tools provided by contemporary narratology are not sufficient to describe and explain these strategies. One could say that in a certain way it is impossible to comprehend contemporary fiction in terms of contemporary narratology developed through interpretations of the nineteenth-century realist and the early twentieth-century modernist fiction. To demonstrate this it would be enough to look over the particular terminology meant to describe the narrators' place within the fictional worlds. Terms like "point of view," "perspective," "angle of vision," and "focalization" not only have a "purely visual sense" and "optical photographic connotations" (Rimmon-Kenan 1988: 71), but also imply that there is a certain, determinable subject enabled by narrative means to perceive, that there is something that can be perceived, and that there is someone capable of verbalizing what is perceived, and, finally, that what is perceived can be verbalized. Hence, a kind of mimetic view of literature can be revealed underneath these terms, although one of the dominant features of contemporary fiction is an explicit undermining and playing with the concept of *mimesis* and all its implications.

Even some of the critics who are very well aware of differences between contemporary fiction and previous ones – realistic and modernist fiction – fail to be consistent in their descriptions. In *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale distinguishes between modernist and postmodernist fiction by formulating two general theses. The dominant of modernist fiction, he states, “is *epistemological*” (McHale 1987: 9), while “the dominant of postmodernist fiction is *ontological*” (McHale 1987:10). He claims that modernist fiction deals with questions such as those posed by Dick Higgins: “How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?” Then he continues by adding other “typical modernist questions,” such as: “What is there to be known?; Who knows it?; How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?; How is knowledge transmitted from one knower to another, and with what degree of reliability?; How does the object of knowledge change as it passes from knower to knower?; What are the limits of the knowable?” (McHale 1987: 9). On the other hand

[...] postmodernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions like the ones Dick Higgins calls “post-cognitive”: “Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?” Other typical postmodernist questions bear either on the ontology of the literary text itself or on the ontology of the world which it projects, for instance: What is a world?; What kinds of world are there, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated? (McHale 1987: 10)

Although questioning "I" and questioning "world" are both equally stressed in quotations excerpted from Higgins's *A Dialectic of Centuries: Notes towards a Theory of the New Arts*, McHale emphasizes only those aspects that concern the world. The ontology of a literary text itself, as well as the ontology of a world it projects, in McHale's terms, are completely dependent on an "I" which has to remain untouched in order to be able to ask all these questions. This is probably the reason why McHale does not notice an interesting contradiction in one of Higgins's questions that he cites, namely, what the meaning of "my" is when there are a lot of "selves." It seems that Higgins also maintains a notion of a unified, individual "I" which can use "my" even in the question: "Which of my selves is to do it?" In this respect, it is possible to say that both Higgins and McHale understand postmodernist art and literature in terms of modernist thought, as they define it.

The same does not go for Linda Hutcheon's studies of postmodernist art and literature. In her books *A Poetics of Postmodernism* and *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon focuses on the problem of representation in contemporary art and literature. She points out that the "parodic art of postmodern" underlines "in its ironic way realization that all cultural forms of representation – literary, visual, aural – in high art or the mass media are ideologically grounded, that they cannot avoid involvement with social and political relations and apparatuses" (Hutcheon 1989: 3). In this regard, "postmodernism works to 'de-doxify' our cultural representations and their undeniable political import"

(Hutcheon 1989: 3). Likewise, postmodernist poetics challenges “any aesthetic theory or practice that either assumes a secure, confident knowledge of the subject or elides the subject completely” (Hutcheon 1988: 158-159). For that reason, postmodern art and literature do not try to deny the “humanist notion of the unitary and autonomous subject,” actually they both instal and subvert it (Hutcheon 1988: 159). The notion of the unitary and autonomous subject is questioned by placing the discussion of subjectivity, inherent in any discursive activity, including their own, into the context of both history and ideology (Hutcheon 1988: 159). To *contextualize* the subject, Hutcheon explains, means to situate it, that is, to recognize differences of race, gender, class, sexual orientation (Hutcheon 1988: 159). A result of such *contextualization*, Hutcheon points out, would be Luce Irigaray’s insight that the “so-called universal and timeless humanist subject” is in fact “bourgeois, white, individual, western ‘Man’” (Hutcheon 1988: 159).

The two processes – *de-doxifying* and *contextualization* of a subject – cannot be separated from each other. On the contrary, still arguing within the framework of feminist thought, Linda Hutcheon claims that “human reality, for both sexes, is a construct,” and that “such a view is bound to pose problems for traditional humanist notions of the stability of the self and of the equation of the self with consciousness” (Hutcheon 1988: 159). Postmodern literature foregrounds an awareness that sociality and subjectivity are implicated in “the production and reproduction of meaning, value and ideology” (Hutcheon 1988: 166). In her analyses and interpretations of contemporary fiction, Hutcheon demonstrates how

postmodern literature questions the established ways of historical representations by dissolving the subject or the "voice" of the narrator who is supposed to be the bearer of the synthetic activity that provides coherence and meaning to the story. "On one hand," writes Hutcheon, "we find overt, deliberately manipulative narrators; on the other hand, no one single perspective but myriad voices, often not completely localizable in the textual universe" (Hutcheon 1988: 160). However, by implying that we need to question and undermine the concept of the narrator as a unified subject in order to question different types of representations, Hutcheon preserves a notion of a hierarchical structure in which the narrator as a point of origin dominates the narration and the fictional world created by her or him:

The metafictional stress on writing, reading, and interpreting emphasises the fact that the gendered subject is where meanings are formed, even though meanings are what constitute the subject. (Hutcheon 1988: 166)

It is not clear why Hutcheon emphasizes that "the subject is where meanings are formed," whereas she is aware that "meanings are what constitute the subject." Nevertheless, further in her text she stresses again that "subjectivity is a fundamental property of language," and repeats, after Kaja Silverman:

If the speaking subject is constituted in and by language, s/he cannot be totally autonomous and in control of her or his own subjectivity, for

discourse is constrained by the rules of the language and open to multiple connotations of anonymous cultural codes. (Hutcheon 1988: 168)

At this point one would expect at least a brief description and explanation of the means by which language constrains the narrator's discourse and how the protagonist is "literally produced" through her or his own and others' discourses (Hutcheon 1988: 169); but Hutcheon does not provide such a description. However, her interpretations of postmodern fiction and visual arts provide a wide space for further analyses of contemporary fiction, concerning particularly the question of how the narrative subject is produced through its own and others' discourses.

## II

On now to serious matters. No, not yet. Another of Mahood's yarns perhaps, to perfect my besotment. No, not worth the trouble, it will come at its appointed hour, the record is in position from time immemorial. Yes the big words must out too, all be taken as it comes. The problem of liberty too, as sure as fate, will come up for my consideration at the pre-established moment. (Beckett 1979: 310)

SAMUEL BECKETT'S "unnamable" speaker foretells this somewhere in the middle of his speech. However, although he pledges that he will talk, because, after all, it is unavoidable, it is pre-established, and therefore it is his fate to talk about it, he does not say a word about liberty until the end of his speech. In fact, this utterance is the only one in which he mentions

liberty. Therefore it is possible to ask: Why does he mention liberty? What does he speak about instead of liberty? And who is he, after all? Whichever of these questions one chooses to answer, one has to admit that it is not possible to give a definite answer. To be precise, it is possible to say that, for example, he is an unnamable, undetermined "I," who speaks about anything that comes to his mind, hence about nothing that can be retold in a coherent sequence of events that makes sense; therefore mentioning liberty is just a coincidence that cannot be interpreted within an incoherent flow of speaker's words and utterances. Or, one can say that by avoiding to mention liberty as something that seems inevitable for him, the speaker in a way demonstrates his ability to be free. Yet, is it necessary to write a hundred pages to demonstrate this? He could end his speech with the sentences quoted to achieve the same effect. Even more, is it necessary to write such a long, rather incomprehensible monologue to demonstrate the possibility to be free? Finally, is it really possible to read this speech in a way that foregrounds the issue of liberty?

In *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale suggests that *The Unnamable* can be construed as a narrative model of "the discontinuity between our own mode of being and that of whatever divinity we may wish there were" (McHale 1989: 13). The Unnamable reveals this discontinuity by foregrounding "the fundamental ontological discontinuity between the fictional and the real" (McHale 1989: 13). The Unnamable not only creates characters, McHale construes, "he also tries to imagine himself as *the character of someone else*" (McHale 1989: 13). "But who?" McHale asks, and asserts that "the ultimate creator, the God whom the Unnamable can

never reach, is of course Samuel Beckett himself" (McHale 1989: 13). There is "the unbreachable barrier between the fictional world of the Unnamable and the real world which Samuel Beckett shares with us, his readers" (McHale 1989: 13). There is no doubt that McHale can support his interpretation by a number of quotations from Beckett's "fictional world." However, there is one important element that McHale's interpretation fails to explain, namely, who is the Unnamable. Who wants to reach God? In fact, McHale explains it in a way that can be seen as an overinterpretation. McHale uses the "Unnamable" as any other proper name to mark the character of Beckett's fiction. It is possible to say that McHale presupposes two things: first, that there is a determinable speaker of Beckett's *The Unnamable*; second, that the speaker can be named as the Unnamable although it is categorically said that he is unnamable. Thus, McHale provides answers to the opening speaker's questions "Where now? Who now? When now?" in spite of the explicit comment that not only are there no answers to these questions, but these questions cannot be asked as such (Beckett 1979: 267). The point is that McHale's answer is too simple: he makes an analogy between the Unnamable, on the one hand, and Beckett and us, his readers, on the other, by introducing Beckett into his own fictional world and then using him as a firm ground to establish the identity of the speaker as something opposed to the author. The fact is that the whole speech of the unnamable speaker can be read as his continuously repeated effort to establish his own identity that still remains highly vague until the end of his speech. In this sense, McHale's construing of *The Unnamable* does not leave room for the speaker's indeterminacy.



However, McHale's interpretation points out two important aspects of Beckett's text: first, it could be said that the speaker – whoever or whatever he is – tries to “imagine himself as the character”; and, second, it could be said that he tries to reach the world of real existence, the one which “Samuel Beckett shares with us, his readers.” In other words, it could be said that the speaker wants to establish himself as a character, a subject, an “I,” in a way that Beckett and we, his readers, are recognized as subjects in a real world. Yet, the unnamable speaker, in spite of McHale's interpretation, does not want to be the same subject as we are – he wants to be recognized as a different one. This is the reason why he should remain unnamable, why he resists being named. Any name would define him, force him to fit within existing patterns of subjectivity, nullifying thus his difference. He claims:

It's a poor trick that consists in ramming a set of words down your gullet on the principle that you can't bring them up without being branded as belonging to their breed. (Beckett 1979: 298)

Thus the question still remains: Who is he? What is he talking about? And how come that although he is unnamable, an undetermined “I,” it is possible to speak about him as a unified subject?

One of the reasons why it is not easy to answer these questions is that we seemingly do not have the appropriate tools to analyze Beckett's fiction. The very term “fiction” implies that we view Beckett's text as a kind of narration. All questions that I have posed here imply that I consider

the unnamable speaker as a kind of a narrator who tells something that probably can be called a story. What makes me read Beckett's text in this way? What causes my impression that, although it seems to be a flow of unrelated, incomplete, incoherent words and utterances, this text makes sense? Otherwise, it is possible to say that it is much easier to demonstrate that Beckett's *The Unnamable* is not narrative fiction at all and therefore cannot be interpreted as a kind of "fiction." For example, Shlomit Rimmon-Kenan is explicit: "unless it told a story" a text "would not be a narrative" (Rimmon-Kenan 1988: 4). And story should be, Rimmon-Kenan explains by relying on Russian formalist Boris Tomashevsky, "a succession of events" (Rimmon-Kenan 1988: 2). Further, since it is a narrative, "it implies someone who speaks" (Rimmon-Kenan 1988: 3). Thus, to have a story we need a succession of events, someone who sees them, and someone who speaks about them. The one who sees and the one who speaks can be one and the same person. This person is also considered a character. "A unified construct called 'character,'" Rimmon-Kenan explains, consists of elements combined "under the aegis of the proper name" (Rimmon-Kenan 1988: 39). Having in mind these definitions, we can try to read two highly representative excerpts from Beckett's text:

[...] what confusion, someone mentions confusion, is it a sin, all here is sin, you don't know why, you don't know whose, you don't know against whom, someone says you, it's the fault of the pronouns, there is no name, for me, no pronoun for me, all the troubles come from that, that, it's a kind of pronoun too, it isn't that either, I'm not that either, let us leave all

that, forget about all that, it's not difficult, our concern is with someone, or our concern is with something, now we're getting it, someone or something that is not there, or that is not anywhere, or that is there, here, why not, after all [...] (Beckett 1979: 372)

[...] if only I could feel something on me, I'll try, if I can, I know it's not I, that's all I know, I say I, knowing it's not I, I am far, far, what does it mean, far, no need to be far, perhaps he's here [...] (Beckett 1979: 372)

Do we have a story here? Is there any succession of events here, or, at least, two of them (two is minimum to have succession, although, according to Gerald Prince and Rimmon-Kenan, a “minimal story” – that is, a complete story – should consist “of three conjoined events” [Rimmon-Kenan 1988: 18])? And who narrates this? Likewise in Booth's interpretation of Stern's *Tristram Shandy*, is there any armor – if we exclude that one of the “Unnamable” in McHale's interpretation – to protect this “story” from falling apart? In Rimmon-Kenan's terms, answers to these questions are likely to be negative. Yet, I still have an impression that the quoted Beckett's lines do make sense. And, I still think that we can read them as a story. Why? It seems that there are no answers to these questions within the framework of Rimmon-Kenan's rather normative description of the contemporary poetics of narrative fiction.

As far as Beckett's work is concerned, it seems that in his writings on narrative fiction, and particularly in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, Mikhail Bakhtin provides a better ground for interpretation.

Instead of asking about a succession of events, it is possible to ask, in Bakhtin's terms, whether there is any event in the quoted passages? And the answer is obvious: there is the event of the enunciation. Is there any succession? Indeed, there is the succession of words, as well as of utterances. What makes the story? The tension between the different and mostly opposite meanings of words, as well as of utterances. Furthermore, the tension between the different meanings inscribed in one and the same word by repetition. According to Bakhtin, one word denotes different concepts within different genres and texts; that is, the word's meaning is changed by the change of context. Yet, this change of context cannot annul the previous meanings of the word. On the contrary, all meanings of the word are effective to a certain extent in every context. Usually, a context is structured to enforce, or establish as the dominant, one among several possible meanings of the word. But sometimes it can be structured to loosen any constraint and allow free flotation of all meanings of the word. The words "confusion" and "sin" in the context of the excerpted passage can be read in this way. On the other hand, meanings of the pronouns "that" and "I" are changed by their repetition within quoted utterances, and the conflict of different and sometimes mutually excluded meanings within the nonhierarchical structure of Beckett's fictional world in a way erases their meanings almost completely. For example: What does "I" mean in the sequence "I say I, knowing it's not I"? Whereas there is a contradiction here – the meanings of "I" and "not I" are mutually excluded, for both cannot be true and both cannot be false – it is possible to say that in this utterance the

meaning of the "I" is undecidable as well as that "I" does not mean anything.

If it is not possible to construe the meaning of the "I" in Beckett's text, why do I ask who tells the story? How come I have a notion that someone is telling the story of the unnamable? Is it possible to imagine a speech without a speaker: just a flow of unrelated words and utterances without an origin and an end? Though it is naive to think that there is a sign that does not have a subject (Kristeva 1980: 129), I suppose that something like that is possible, but then I would not call that a story. I read *The Unnamable* as a story, which means that I think that the succession of utterances and words in the speaker's speech is coherent, hence makes sense. Finally, this means that I see the unnamable speaker as a kind of a unified subject who is capable of telling the story. In fact, I claim that the seemingly incoherent sequence of words and utterances, that in a way undermine each others' meanings, finally make sense, and that the speaker, who refuses to be named and given an identity, hence to be recognized as a subject, is finally established as a subject, the different one, by the very sequence of words and utterances. *The Unnamable* is a story of one's being established as a subject. It is possible to construe the sense of the succession of the speaker's words and utterances as a process of forming the speaker's own identity.

At one moment, near the end of the speech, the succession of words is interrupted by the sequences of murmurs:

[...] no need to wish, that's how it will end, in heart-rending cries, in articulate murmurs, to be invented, as I go along, improvised, as I groan along, I'll laugh, that's how it will end, in a chuckle, chuck, chuck, ow, ha, pa, I'll practice, nyum, hoo, plop, psss, nothing but emotion, bing bang, that's blows, ugh, pooh, what else, ooh, aaah, that's love, enough, it's tiring, hee hee [...] (Beckett 1979: 375-6)

How are we to understand this? It seems that Julia Kristeva's distinction between "the semiotic" and "the symbolic" provides a ground for construing this excerpt from Beckett's text. In her essay "A Question of Subjectivity," Kristeva says that she is particularly interested in cases similar to that of Beckett's lines, that is, she is interested in cases in which language is pushed to its limits or when it does not function any more. She explores those situations in which language, signs of language, or identity itself become instable and are put into 'process'. These are the moments when norms break up. This modality or condition of meaning Kristeva calls "the semiotic." She explains that the semiotic is related closely to the pre-linguistic states of childhood, when the child imitates and articulates the sounds and rhythms of her/his surroundings. On the other side, we have another modality or condition of meaning that Kristeva calls "the symbolic." "The symbolic" follows the mirror phase and that is the stage in which the individual is enabled to acquire language, to articulate it as it has been given. Movement from "the semiotic" into "the symbolic" is the process of "stabilizing the subject." In the "mirror phase" one recognizes one's own image in a mirror as one's self-image, but this first self-identity

is not stable. Stabilization of one's identity, in "the ideal case," is completed when one becomes capable both of using language in a prescribed way and articulating one's own story. However, it is illusory to think that one can assume a fixed identity, since it is made upon one's first self-image which is not real, and which stability is possible only through subjection of our desire for the mother, that is, through suppression of something that is also a part of one's self. Regarding this, it is possible to say that the only way for one to become a subject, an "I," is to get rid of one's own self, although this "self" in a way does not exist before the "I." In this sense, the meaning of "I say I, knowing it's not I" becomes clearer: now it is not a contradiction, but a paradox. This utterance is a good example of what Kristeva defines as "moments of instability, where language, or the signs of language, or subjectivity itself are put into 'process,'" or "the signifying phenomenon for the *crisis* or the *unsettling process* of meaning and subject" (Kristeva 1980: 125). Thus, "the subject in process," in Kristeva's terms, is the subject who, through taking into account the heterogeneity of language as a double modality of "the semiotic" and "the symbolic," takes into account his/her own heterogeneity, his/her "false" identity and his/her suppressed "self."

In her essay "From One Identity to an Other," Kristeva explains that, although the symbolic is the "inevitable attribute of meaning, sign, and the signified object," both dispositions, "the semiotic" and "the symbolic," are necessarily presupposed by language as social practice (Kristeva 1980: 134). Nonetheless, "univocal, rational, scientific discourse" has a tendency to hide "this undecidable character of any so-called natural language"

(Kristeva 1980: 135). Poetic language, produced by the "experience of the semiotic," by its rhythms, alliterations, metaphors, metonymies, musicality ("oooh, aaah, that's love, enough"), foregrounds the heterogeneous character of language (Kristeva 1980: 135), that is, its *undecidableness*.

Yet:

However elided, attacked, or corrupted the symbolic function might be in poetic language, due to the impact of semiotic processes, the symbolic function nonetheless maintains its presence. It is for this reason that it is a language. First, it persists as an internal limit of this bipolar economy, since a multiple and sometimes even incomprehensible signified is nevertheless communicated; secondly, it persists also because the semiotic processes themselves, far from being set adrift (as they would be in insane discourse), set up a new formal construct: a so-called new formal or ideological "writer's universe," the never-finished, undefined production of a new space of significance. (Kristeva 1980: 134-5)

It is not clear what "a new space of significance" means in terms of a language that persists as "an internal limit." Questioning Kristeva's concept of "the semiotic" in her *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler asks: "If the semiotic promotes the possibility of the subversion, displacement, or disruption of the paternal law, what meanings can those terms have if the Symbolic always reasserts its hegemony?" (Butler 1990: 80). Kristeva would probably answer that any creative act is made possible by the opening of the norms. But the point is: What is really the result of putting



the subject in the process? And what does the phrase "opening the norms" mean in terms of, again, internal limits? Is "the subject in process" there just for the sake of questioning its identity and undermining its stability as a subject? What is the purpose of that? Does the subject go through this process just to reveal that it can be nothing but "the 'subject' who emerges as a consequence of this repression" and "becomes a bearer or proponent of this repressive law" (Butler 1990: 79)? Does one open the norms just to reveal that their internal limits cannot be changed? Regarding *The Unnamable*, these questions can be restated as follows: Does the unnamable speaker speak just to reveal that he cannot express himself as a different subject, that he cannot speak at all "without being branded as belonging to their breed"? And if he emerges as a consequence of this repression of being branded, does it mean that he becomes a bearer or proponent of this repressive law? Is this the reason why he does not speak about liberty, but just mentions it in passing? In other words, why do I still think that this is a story about the forming of a new identity, or about the possibility of being a different subject, or about using words without being branded, or about setting oneself free of the repressive law? Namely – after all – about freedom?

According to Kristeva, "it is impossible to treat problems of signification seriously, in linguistics or semiology, without including in these considerations *the subject thus formulated as operating consciousness*" (Kristeva 1980: 131). "A definite subject," "the speaking subject," "the *subject of enunciation*," Kristeva claims, "is present as soon as there is consciousness of signification" (Kristeva 1980: 124). Hence,

consciousness of signification establishes speaking subjects within the frame of the internal limits of pronouncing sentences which conform to the rules, to the law, that is, to articulation as it has been prescribed. Thus, in Kristeva's terms, the unnamable speaker cannot avoid being branded as soon as he uses words that have been rammed down to his gullet. Still, the unnamable speaker states very clearly:

Someone speaks, someone hears, no need to go any further, it is not he, it's I, or another, or others, what does it matter, the case is clear, it is not he, he who I know I am, that's all I know, who I cannot say I am, I can't say anything [...] (Beckett 1979: 370)

Here we have consciousness of signification, and thus we have the subject of enunciation, but then, who is he? According to Kristeva, he can be either a definite subject or a subject in process. Since it is obvious that he is not a definite subject, the unnamable speaker can be, within the framework of Kristeva's theory, only a subject in process. As a subject in process he is capable of using, and actually uses, both possibilities of language, "the symbolic" as well as "the semiotic," staying within the frame of its bipolar economy. Therefore, although an unstable one, he is still a subject, according to Kristeva. But that is exactly what the unnamable speaker denies in the quoted utterance: someone speaks, but it is not "he," nor "I," moreover, it doesn't matter. This is an explicit refusal of being defined as a subject in a prescribed way. Kristeva's theory does not allow such a breaking of the norms: the norms can be opened, but not broken. There is

only one solution to understand the unnamable speaker in Kristeva's terms: since the semiotic processes themselves are "far from being set adrift," otherwise it "would be an insane discourse," it turns out that the unnamable speaker can be understood only as an insane subject. Indeed, this is one possibility. Moreover, the only one, but within a certain framework: within the framework of the norms of the repressive law.

Being insane is, of course, one of the possibilities of breaking the norms. But does it imply freedom? It is not enough to break the norms. The breaking of the norms has to be recognized as a forming of new norms. In other words, it is not enough to be different, one has to be recognized as different. Is that possible? Does the unnamable speaker accomplish it?

At one moment, the speaker tells us the following story:

They love each other, marry, in order to love each other better, more conveniently, he goes to the wars, he dies at the wars, she weeps, with emotion, at having loved him, at having lost him, yep, marries again, in order to love again, more conveniently again, they love each other, you love as many times as necessary, as necessary in order to be happy, he comes back, the other comes back, from the wars, he didn't die at the wars after all, she goes to the station, to meet him, he dies in the train, of emotion, at the thought of seeing her again, having her again, she weeps, weeps again, with emotion again, at having lost him again, yep, goes back to the house, he's dead, the other is dead, the mother-in-law takes him down, he hanged himself, with emotion, at the thought of losing her, she weeps, weeps louder, at having loved him, at having lost him, there's a story for you; that was to teach me the nature of emotion, what emotion

can do, given favorable conditions, what love can do, well well, so that's emotion, that's love, and trains, the nature of trains, and the meaning of your back to engine, and guards, stations, platforms, wars, heart-rending cries, that must be mother-in-law, her cries rend the heart as she takes down her son, or her son-in-law, I don't know, it must be her son, since she cries, and the door, the house door is bolted, who bolted it, when she got back from the station she found the house-door bolted, who bolted it, he the better to hang himself, or the mother-in-law the better to take him down, or to prevent her daughter-in-law from re-entering the premises, there's a story for you [...] (Beckett 1979: 374)

And then he comments: "[...] the door, it's the door interests me, a wooden door, who bolted the door[...]" (Beckett 1979: 375). One can say that this story is at least interesting. And one can ask something about the notions of love, emotion, wars, even trains, in this story. But, what about – the door? I suppose one hardly needs to ask anything about the door in this story. Yet, that is the only thing that interests the speaker. Why? Almost at the end of his speech, the speaker says: "[...] it's the door, perhaps I am at the door, that would surprise me, [...] it's I now at the door, what door, what's the door doing here, [...]" (Beckett 1979: 381). Can we construe the meaning of the door in these utterances? It is possible to say that the door can be the metaphor of a border, a kind of a threshold between the two spaces? Can we distinguish these spaces? Just before he says that he is interested in the door, the speaker recounts: "[...] it was to teach me how to reason, it was to tempt me to go, to the place where you can come to an end, I must have

been a good pupil up to a point, I couldn't get beyond a certain point, I can understand their annoyance, [...]" (Beckett 1979: 375). It seems that it is possible to equate "a certain point" with "the door." Regarding this, we can distinguish two spaces as follows: there is a place where they are, where one is taught how to reason, and where you can come to an end; and there is a place where the speaker is. When he says "there is a story for you" it can be understood like this: he, from within his space gives the story to "you" who are within an other space. Further, it can be understood that he says that he knows how to tell a story, which can come to an end, for those "you," but that is not his story, that is their story. Thus he gives up telling this story and starts to talk about the door. That is his story. And this means that within each of these two different spaces symbolically divided by the door there is a particular kind of story, each different from the other one.

Something more can be said about these two spaces: they do not exist one beside or parallel to the other without any connections and exchanges. On the contrary, there is a kind of relation between them – a relation of "annoyance" or, to say, of "abjection." So it could be said that there is a possibility, or rather a tendency that these two places are mutually exclusive. But, are they really? I am inclined to understand the relation between these two places in terms of Judith Butler's discussion on the "zone of uninhabitability." The "zone of uninhabitability" is the domain of "abject beings" (Butler 1993: 3) And the function of this "zone of uninhabitability" is to "constitute the defining limit of the subject's domain" (Butler 1993: 3). The subject's domain, or, in Beckett's words, the domain of the breed, is regulated by the norms. Actually, the norms in a

“performative fashion” constitute subjects, and they can be effective as performative acts only through reiteration. Thus, one becomes a subject through the performative, which becomes effective through reiteration and is determined by abjection. Butler asserts:

In this sense, then, the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, “inside” the subject as its own founding repudiation. (Butler 1993: 3)

“‘Inner’ and ‘outer,’” Butler explains, “make sense only with reference to a mediating boundary that strives for stability” (Butler 1990: 134). The “mediating boundary that strives for stability,” or, in Beckett’s words, “the door,” is the very boundary between the “outer” of the unnamable speaker and “inner” of them to whom he speaks. And this can be said the other way around: the “inner” of the unnamable speaker and “outer” of them to whom he speaks; because this turning the other way is what the unnamable speaker in fact does, or what is done to him. He is established as the subject almost in the same way as others are established: through a performative reiteration of the norms. The difference is that what is “inner” in the space of the unnamable speaker becomes “outer,” and, the other way around, what is “outer” becomes “inner.” Therefore it is possible to say that the process of constructing the unnamable speaker as a subject within Beckett’s fictional world mirrors the process of constructing subjects within the framework of norms. What is recognized as a subject within the framework

of norms becomes abjected within the fictional world of the unnamable speaker, and what is abjected by the norms becomes a subject within the fictional world by the use of the same procedure. "On their own ground, with their own arms, I'll scatter them, and their miscreated puppets," the unnamable speaker claims (Beckett 1979: 298). The unnamable speaker establishes himself as a subject within the "zone of uninhabitability," or within the domain of "abject beings," by a very simple permutation, or by a mere renaming; he simply defines the domain of the subjects as the domain of abject beings. And this renaming becomes performative, that is, effective through continuous reiteration throughout his speech.

\* \* \*

HOWEVER, THERE IS REASON enough to ask what conditions need to be fulfilled so that the unnamable narrator's performative acts eventually become effective? Is this rebellion of Beckett's protagonist conducted only at the level of speech acts? Unlike Šalgo's Anna O., the narrator of *The Unnamable* does not withdraw into a complete isolation. In his strange way, he puts himself in a permanent relation and interaction with the external world of Beckett's fiction. Yet, is it sufficient for assuming a new identity?

As we have seen, resistance in the domain of the psyche is doomed to failure. So, what is the domain in which there is a possibility for successful resistance, powerful enough to change the norms of acceptance of new identities? According to the previous discussion, the answer ought to be that the body provides the ground for an effective rebellion. In the particular case of Beckett's unnamable narrator it is not only the matter of a body in the process of disintegration that could be given "the shape, if not the consistency, of an egg, with two holes no matter where to prevent it from bursting, for the consistency is more like that of mucilage" (Beckett 1979: 279), or "one-armed one-legged" body, or the "wedge-headed trunk" that is just another phase "of the same carnal envelope" (Beckett 1979: 303), here we are talking about the body that is losing its masculine features as well:

The tumefaction of the penis! The penis, well now, that's a nice surprise, I'd forgotten I had one. What a pity I have no arms, there might still be something to be wrung from it. No 'tis better thus. (Beckett 1979: 305)



The sequence of the bodily malfunctions is ended by the complete lost of masculinity:

[...] look, here's the medical report, spasmodic tabes, painless ulcers, I repeat, painless, all is painless, multiple softenings, manifold hardenings, insensitive to blows, sight failing, heart irregular, sweet-tampered, smell failing, heavy sleeper, no erections, would you like some more [...]  
(Beckett 1979: 347)

Such a body cannot serve as a ground for establishing an identity acceptable within the framework of the "law." As soon as the body's gender is questioned, a new identity is about to be formed. This formation of a new identity is then possible through the deliberate implementation of performative practices of discursive techniques disclosed by parodying strategies. "On their own ground, with their own arms," claims the unnamable narrator, foretelling Judith Butler's insight that the "law" could be opposed successfully only by itself.

## IV

## 6. CONCLUSION

THERE ARE TWO ASPECTS of this thesis that I would like to highlight at the end. Both aspects are related to some important theoretical issues considering methods of interpretation. To explain this, I will start from my "interlude" chapter. By construing or playing with David Albahari's extremely short story I wanted to show how important a theoretical framework is for understanding even one short sentence presented as a story. By changing interpretative contexts I tried to offer several possible interpretations that may not be in any obvious or firm mutual relation, and yet, at the same time, that do not exclude each other.

On the level of the whole thesis, I did exactly the same: I chose the theoretical discussion on subjectivity and identity as the framework for construing Judita Šalgo's and Samuel Beckett's novels. At the same time, I did with Butler's theory what I did with the fictional works that I interpreted. I chose to understand Butler's work within the context of Berlin's, Douglas's, and Kristeva's works. I deliberately did not take into account Foucault, who is Butler's main source and point of departure. I

thought that it would be useful to draw parallels between Butler's groundbreaking thoughts, and ideas of some conservative thinkers like Berlin and Douglas. Whatever Butler says about the liberal-humanist tradition, her insights are heavily directed by that tradition, just as her political engagement is deeply inspired by and rooted in the liberal politics of human rights and equality.

As far as my interpretations are concerned, I want to foreground my "interlude" again. The structure of the "interlude" is as follows: I start with a theoretical problem, and then elaborate it by using an appropriate example from literature. Indeed, I do not think that by interpreting one short sentence presented as a story, as well as by interpreting a whole novel, I could manage to offer the ultimate solution. And that was not my intention, after all. What I wanted to demonstrate is that some theoretical problems of interpretation of works of literature could be solved within the theoretical contexts that are broader than the context of literary criticism itself. For example, if we are talking about the features of a narrator or other fictional characters, we implicitly or explicitly assume a whole set of definitions of what the person, self, or identity is. On the other hand, once we choose a broader theoretical framework, we ought to use all of those tools developed within literary theory for the purposes of interpretation. Somewhere at the beginning of the chapter on Beckett's *The Unnamable* I wrote that we could not use old-fashioned tools to interpret twentieth-century fiction. However, at the end of that chapter it turns out that I manage to interpret *The Unnamable* in terms of "classical" knowledge of literary criticism. And, as I

pointed out in my introduction, I managed to do it by choosing an appropriate, broader theoretical framework.

The issue of identity is of great importance in literature as well as in literary criticism. I am inclined to believe that there is no better and more obvious example of the construction of identities than those numerous works of literary fiction. However, in literary criticism as well as in other fields of humanities, an identity is taken to be something pre-given, already existing, rather than something formed, produced by and within a given text or discourse.

The feminist discussion on the issue of identity, focused mainly on the question whether feminist politics need a firm concept of feminine identity, opens a way to the conclusion that every identity accepted within and by society is in fact a social or cultural product. This insight eventually provides us with an appropriate ground for understanding and interpreting works of contemporary literature, and particularly the works of contemporary fiction that are usually considered almost unapproachable. I chose three literary works of that kind and read them in accordance with the chosen theory. The fact that within a certain context I managed to establish their meanings not only confirms that the chosen theoretical framework was appropriate for interpreting these works, but demonstrates that the theory itself functions as a sound explanatory model as well.

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