SUBJECTIVITY and LITERATURE from the ROMANTICS to the PRESENT DAY

CREATING the SELF

Edited by Philip Shaw and Peter Stockwell

# Subjectivity and Literature from the Romantics to the Present Day

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## Foreword

Books, like people, have birth dates and histories. This collection began life as a conference held at Liverpool University in October 1989. Our intention as conference organizers was to provide a forum for young academics to meet and exchange ideas on a topic of wide-ranging significance for a variety of research interests. From Kant to Foucault and from Wordsworth to Derrida, the quest for self-constitution within expressive language has been taken as a measure for the triumphs, the 'pathos', and the eventual 'defeat' of post-Enlightenment thought. To investigate the claims made for and against 'the subject' of that thought, and to coincide with the bicentenary of an inaugural event in its history, the conference assembled papers from a variety of disciplines under the original title of 'The Coming of the Subject: Making the Self from 1789–1989'. The event proved to be so successful that it was decided to present the papers in the form of a book.

This collection therefore represents the final stage in a conference 'process'. Papers presented orally and followed by general discussion were subsequently revised into a written register appropriate for publication for a wider academic audience. We believe, however, that the business of academics is not *simply* to produce books; face to face communication is a vital part of maintaining the links between those engaged in new and challenging areas of research. It is to be hoped that the process does not end here but that future conferences and publications will re-evaluate the issues dealt with by the contributors to this volume.

Obviously, with a collective enterprise of this kind, the editors owe much to the efforts of all those who attended and participated in the original conference. Firstly, we wish to thank all of those who have contributed to this volume for the speed and good humour with which they revised and prepared work to be re-presented in written form. Professor Vincent Newey was instrumental in providing support and advice at all stages. In this respect we would also like to thank the following: Paul Simpson, Geoff Ward, Brian Nellist, Linda Williams, Nick Davis, Brean Hammond, Simon Dentith, Suzanne Trill, Jane Morton, Andrew Foster, Joanna McIntyre, Susan Riley, Helen Chapman and Sara Wilbourne of Pinter Publishers for her persistence and encouragement in seeing the project through its final stages. Finally, our greatest debt must go to the English Department secretaries, Cathy Rees and Barbara Smith, for their infinite patience and skill when dealing with the consequences of our initial ineptitude.

Philip Shaw and Peter Stockwell Liverpool, May 1990



Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778): Imaginary Prison, plate XIV of the Carceri d'Invenzione, c. 1761. Etching.

## Contents

Lis	t of Contributors	
Ac	knowledgements	
For	reword	
Introduction		1
1	Exceeding Romanticism Philip Shaw	12
2	Is Emily Brontë a Woman?: Feminity, Feminism and the Paranoid Critical Subject Emma Francis	28
3	'What Language Can Utter the Feeling': Identity in the Poetry of Emily Brontë Kathryn Burlinson	41
4	Epiphany and Subjectivity in Charlotte Brontë's Villette Susan Watkins	49
5	'They Suck Us Dry': A Study of Late Nineteenth- century Projections of Vampiric Women Sian Macfie	58
6	Wallace Stevens: An Exemplary Subject Carolyn Masel	68
7	The Ideological Eye-witness: An Examination of the Eye-witness in Two Works by George Orwell Peter Marks	85
8	'Pretending to Be Me': Larkin versus 'Larkin' Peter MacDonald Smith	93
9	Language, Knowledge, and the Stylistics of Science Fiction Peter Stockwell	101
10	Narrative Voice and Focalization: The Presentation of the Different Selves in John Fowles' The Collector	113

11	Feminism, Language or Existentialism: The Search for the Self in the Works of Clarice Lispector Barbara Mathie	121
12	Portrait of the Subject as a Young Man: The Construction of Masculinity Ironized in 'Male' Fiction Lynda Broughton	135
13	The Spaced-out Subject: Bachelard and Perec Jamie Brassett	146
14	The Death of Orality and the Rise of the Literate 'Subject' David Wilson	159
Index		173

## Introduction

In the 'male' text, whatever the sex of the writer, the subject of discourse is male, and the narrative celebrates the characteristics of the hero: singular, sublime, mediating the world through the special consciousness of the transcendental subject, privileged, central, essential.

An assemblage of qualities, categories and classifications: in the 'male' text—defined here through the analysis of a short story, 'Homemade', by Ian McEwan, included in this volume (chapter 12)—the hero of romanticism melts imperceptibly into the subject of postmodernism where reading is at work everywhere. Speaking fluently at times, at other times in stutters, the 'I' is convulsed in a fitful scheme of self-assertion and self-negation. What a mistake it then becomes to have ever said the opening or the end of man. In marking these limits we stand rather, with Derrida, Deleuze and the later Foucault, on the arrêt or knife-edge of the question: a figure drawn in sand at the ocean's edge, soon to be erased by the incoming tide . . . later to be redrawn, reinvested, born again.

To draw our subject into 'the change of terrain' that the distance between the romantic and the contemporary might cover, one thinks, for example of Piranesi's prison drawings, the famous Carceri d'Inventione.<sup>2</sup> Etched in the mideighteenth century, they present us now with the chillingly familiar logic of the body in extremis, a delirious effect produced by the machinery of a work whose obsession with the vertiginous possibilities of architecture leads its subject towards the outer darkness of representational collapse. Referring neither to inner nor outer space, they submit the viewer to the breakdown of perspective and the loss of centre; everywhere there is the same stairwell, the same passage, and the same ghostly figure, repeated endlessly until the flight from confinement breaks on the edge of a terrifying infinity. Here one searches in vain for ground on which to restore the disappearing boundaries between subject and object, spectator and prisoner. At a point just beyond our gaze the hallucinatory power of the Carceri works to destroy all such distinctions until, in the end, we experience the disturbing possibility that torturer and victim. subject and spectator are one and the same. As the stones fall apart there is no final resolution, only the process of redoubling that stands in the place where we had expected to find the origin or the 'truth' of Being: a dwelling for the birth/death of the subject.

In Piranesi's vision of the collapse of opening and closure, of freedom and constraint, there is a foreshadowing of the time—our own—when Immanuel Kant's philosophy of the Sublime will be forced into a meeting with the nonsense of delirium.<sup>3</sup> We will speak then of two foundations: the one in reason, the other in desire.

Writing in the preface to his own book on Kant, which was first published in 1963 and translated into English in 1984, the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze puts this relation into perspective. There is, he says, a 'deeply romantic Kant in the Critique of Judgement. In the two other Critiques, the various subjective faculties entered into relationships with each other, but these relationships were rigorously regulated in so far as there was always a dominant or determining faculty which imposed its rule on the others' (Deleuze 1984: xi). These faculties are: external sense, inner sense, imagination, understanding, and reason, each 'well-defined' and separated according to a certain hierarchical arrangement. Thus, in the The Critique of Pure Reason, the understanding was dominant 'because it determined inner sense through the intermediary of a synthesis of the imagination, and even reason submitted to the role which was assigned to it by the understanding' (p. xi). In the Critique of Practical Reason, on the other hand, reason was placed in the dominant role since 'it constituted the pure form of universality of the law, the other faculties following as they might (the understanding applied the law, the imagination received the sentence, the inner sense felt the consequences or the sanction)' (p. xi).

By the time of the *Critique of Judgement*, however, we find Kant wrestling with a problem that was already inherent in the troubled perspectives of the *Carceri*. Kant's undertaking, as Deleuze states, was extraordinary:

if the faculties can, in this way, enter into relationships which are free and variable, but regulated by one or other of them, it must follow that all together are capable of relationships which are free and unregulated, where each goes to its own limit and nevertheless shows the possibility of some sort of harmony with the others... Thus we have the Critique of Judgement as the foundation of Romanticism. (Deleuze 1984: xi-xii)

What does this last statement mean? Deleuze describes the third Critique as 'a terrible struggle between imagination and reason, and also between understanding and inner sense, a struggle whose episodes are the two forms of the Sublime, and then Genius' (p. xii). Yet it is from this fundamental discord. experienced through the inadequacy of the imagination to comprehend, by reason, the magnitude of the Sublime, that the mind can feel itself 'set in motion' (bewegt). In bringing the various faculties into play, the Sublime is able to grant an infinite power of free reflection to the imagination and an unlimited conceptual power to the understanding; but what is here potentially disruptive. even damaging to the sense of composure which Kant (and also Coleridge) will later go on to describe as the essential characteristic of the original Genius. must first be regulated by an act of wilfull submission. Thus Kant's greatest coup after describing the terrifying effect of the Sublime is to immediately reinvest it as a brief but necessary element of discordancy within a universal system of harmonious accord. The Sublime is utilized as a function of that which makes us alive to the feeling of the law. If then, in the initial encounter with the Sublime, the imagination recoils upon itself and is reduced to impotence, it is not as an effect of the supersensible in nature but of reason which forces the mind to unite the magnitude of the sensible world into a comprehensive totality. As Deleuze (1984: 51) puts it, 'Imagination thus learns that it is reason which pushes it to the limit of its power, forcing it to admit that

all its power is nothing in comparison to an Idea'. We are thus prepared for the advent of the moral law.

In this respect, however, we are reminded that Piranesi's is a Sublime of incarceration, and is therefore a parody of legislative reason. Perhaps the unidentified and seemingly multiple subject, the prisoner of the Carceri, has broken some fundamental law, a failure to enforce the submission of the imagination to the higher faculty of reason. The Sublime in this case has an indeterminate destination, and if reason brings us to a focus, it is only in order to deregulate, endlessly it seems, the conditions of our own self-legislation. Thus we join with Foucault and the Deleuze of Anti-Oedipus (Deleuze and Guartari 1984) to link the architecture of discipline and punishment to the architectonics of the subject whose natural tendency or line of flight has always been in a direction away from the confinements of reason, repetition and systematicity. But if we choose against the law, identifying with Deleuze and the later Foucault—a fundamental complicity between the 'truth' of enlightenment and the agencies of social repression (paranoia, neurosis: our ongoing failure to meet the standards of the universal)—are we then able to resist the return of the Carceri in some other more domesticated form?:

the 'logic' of every relation to the outside is very complex and surprising. It is precisely the force and the efficiency of the system that regularly change transgressions into 'false exits'. Taking into account these effects of the system, one has nothing, from the inside where 'we are', but the choice between two strategies:

- a. To attempt an exit and a deconstruction without changing terrain, by repeating what is implicit in the founding concepts and the original problematic, by using against the edifice the instruments or stones available in the house, that is, equally, in language. Here, one risks ceaselessly confirming, consolidating, relifting (relever), at an always more certain depth, that which one allegedly deconstructs. The continuing process of making explicit, moving toward an opening, risks sinking into the autism of the closure.
- b. To decide to change terrain, in a discontinuous and irruptive fashion, by brutally placing oneself outside, and by affirming an absolute break and difference. Without mentioning all the other forms of trompe-l'œil perspective in which such a displacement can be caught, thereby inhabiting more naively and more strictly than ever the inside one declares one has deserted, the simple practice of language ceaselessly reinstates the new terrain on the oldest ground. (Derrida 1982: 135)

If, in the Carceri, it is impossible to discover the cornerstone on which the edifice can be made to fall, it is because the image of the interior has been replaced with a more productive and fluid—one would say machine-like—vision of the dwelling. Likewise, it is still more difficult in a consciously postmodernist text, such as Ian McEwan's 'Homemade', to locate the point where irony works on the side of the reader to consolidate perspective and to reveal the moment where the glorification of violence is displaced by the critique of violence.

Through reading 'Homemade', one could say that the doctrine of the faculties has been thrown into delirious confusion. Utilizing the shock appeal of irony, inversion, and the formidable appeal of Gothic horror, the excesses of McEwan's literary style subvert any attempt on the part of the reader to

reconstitute the habitual distinctions of gender, politics, legitimacy and truth. Writing of this kind, as Lynda Broughton's essay points out, is never 'clear': its machinery is rather directed towards the re-evaluation of all forms of intellectual production, including the creation of distinctions, traditions and genres. But if the ironic subject of 'Homemade' rests uneasily in the company of those slightly more assured heroes of literary history—the writers of say. The Prelude, Don Juan, Great Expectations, Middlemarch—it is because it longs. with some futility, to escape the tantalizing claims of the romantic past. One discovers, for example, in the language Broughton uses to describe the characteristics of McEwan's anti-hero, a genealogy of terms that is indebted to the discourse of romanticism, and more specifically in reference to the Sublime and the transcendental, to the critical thought of Kant. As Derrida reminds us. there is a problem with changing terrain, a problem that has its own violence and the possibility of its own descent into the paranoiac structures of totality and oppression. It is not enough to say that one can merely exceed Kant by 'brutally placing oneself outside' since no proposition, however radical in its intent, can function without falling back on the anthropomorphic and metaphysical resources vested in language.4

Yet there is a way in which the violence of the critical act can be incorporated into the text. The question turns on the incline between truth and provocation, between say, Kant and Nietzsche, Hegel and Bataille, Dickens and Ian McEwan or, for Gilles Deleuze (1983: 108), on the violence of those 'forces which take hold of thought'. In tracing, therefore, the unutterable tenor of a thought that can be seen to persist through many of these essays, it may be that what a story such as 'Homemade' finds missing in the critique of the romantic self is in fact a genealogy of the passage which leads beyond Kant, the analysis of which seeks to uncover, or perhaps even to liberate, 'the will which hides itself and expresses itself in reason' (Deleuze 1983: 91). Seen in this way, literary violence is a reaction to the unthought background of the history of the self, a history that has, as its problematic origin, the difference or distance between the following set of pronouncements: 'Now, I say, man and, in general, every rational being exists as an end in himself'; 'man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end'.<sup>5</sup>

If Derrida reacts to this passage, it is because he mistrusts the potentially reductive metaphorics of terrains, buildings and houses; the placing of origins against ends in the 'economy of the eves' (Derrida 1982: 136). Instead of a change of place, what we need is a change of 'style'; 'and if there is style. Nietzsche reminded us, it must be plural' (p. 135). In other words there is no question of a simple choice between these two strategies, between Kant and Foucault, since they are really complementary to each other. Rather, we must choose both at once as if there were two ends of man; the end as eschaton and the end as telos. Here there is no question of doing away with the subject, instead one must analyse where it comes from and how it functions. When Derrida deconstructs man as a sovereign subject in command of the building blocks of reason and language, he is made to fragment within a system of textual relations, 'the psyche, society, the world' (Derrida 1978: 227). Within the writing system the concept of the subject performs only a legitimizing function and it is up to the reader to refrain from continuing to conceive of this function as a static, or non-evolutionary essence. In Derrida's example, and in Ian McEwan's text, the provocation of writing as an excessive and ironical form

of play resists the classical notion of the subject which functions as the limit between the submission to 'truth' and the will to a more radical exploration of the questions of discourse, gender, power and privilege. In short, this is the task that many of the essays in this book address.

As the example from Lynda Broughton's essay shows, the discourse of Kantian reason persists, and often in the most unexpected places. Carolyn Masel, in her essay on the poetry of Wallace Stevens (chapter 6), points to the interest in the Sublime as the 'mode or genre in which deferral is necessary to transcendence': alterity is dependent on the difference between self and other. 'he' and 'she', 'it' and 'they'. Yet, as Masel clearly shows, Stevens is able to move within this system in such a way as to present to romantic/Kantian thought the possibility of its own dissolution. Similarly, Peter Marks, in writing of George Orwell's creation of the 'eye-witness' (chapter 7), makes reference to the court-room drama as the mise-en-scène of self-determination, an implicit reminder of Kant's notion of the legislator-subject in which judgement is subjected to the high court of universal reason. But in setting up the versus of a conceptual opposition between self and other (the opposition also of 'Larkin versus "Larkin" in Peter MacDonald Smith's paper, chapter 8) we should not be surprised to discover that the outcome has always been rigged, that judge, defence and prosecution are locked in complicity.

If, as with Descartes, the speaking subject of Kant's imaginary courtroom is the cogito, it is only conceived following a line of absolute destruction represented by methodical doubt. Its specific existence, the ergo sum of the dominant reality, becomes a form of reconstitution, which has, in a very significant sense, always already been guaranteed by the cogito as an a priori whose effectiveness can never come under the same rigorous critique as all the other phenomena whose existence had been put into question. According to Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 130), in Descartes and in Kant the legislatorsubject replaces 'the signifying despot' (God, the King), but with the following paradoxical effect: 'the more you obey the statements of the dominant reality, the more in command you are as subject of enunciation in mental reality, for in the end you are only obeying yourself! You are the one in command, in your capacity as a rational being. A new form of slavery is invented, namely, being slave to oneself, or to pure 'reason', the Cogito'. Furthermore, the cogito is 'a proceeding ('procès' or trial), that must always be recommenced, haunted by the possibility of betrayal, a deceitful God, and an evil Genius' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 128).

In Orwell's case the process of subjection is evident in the distance the narrator experiences between individual and collective desires, in the transfer of power from colonizer to colonized, in the swiftly closing gap between oppressor and oppressed. The conflict in a short story such as 'A Hanging', between the desire on the part of Orwell to provide an objective analysis of the effects of imperialism in Burma, whilst at the same time portraying the existential crisis of the narrator, is in reality an effect caused from the transferal of rule by a despotic regime (the British Raj) to the despotism of the self; the Western official whose victimization of the native Indians as an instrument of authoritarian rule becomes internalized through voluntary subjection to the slavery of the bad conscious, to the cogito, the court of reason. The fact that Marks draws out the equivocity produced by a text of this kind serves to remind us that the Kantian appeal to the supposedly universal conditions of

taste and disinterestedness has always implicated in it the unexamined values of 'those who judge and evaluate' (Deleuze 1983: 1), and all ways of being, as Deleuze (1983: 102) reminds us (via Nietzsche), are either high or low, noble or base.

This is the point where idealist philosophy meets the challenge presented by materialist and feminist critiques of the subject. In this respect the readings of Emily and Charlotte Brontë (chapters 2, 3 and 4), have sought to engage a certain tradition within literary criticism in which the subject's encounter with the Sublime has been defined exclusively in terms of the masculine economy of loss and gain. Thus, in the formation of canons, we find the poetry of Emily Brontë denigrated to a secondary position in deference to the stabilizing authority of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Byron. Women's writing, as Christine Battersby has recently argued,6 is subjected to a history of critical depreciation whose organon has been formed within the discourse of Kantian reason. In the nineteenth century especially, the differentiation between the characteristics considered Beautiful (and hence representative of female virtues) and those characteristics designated Sublime (belonging exclusively to the orders of a male intellectual élite), owes much to the tradition of theorizing sex differences which we find in Kant's early essay, Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime (1764): 'The fair sex has just as much understanding as the male, but it is a beautiful understanding, whereas ours should be a deep understanding, an expression which signifies identity with the sublime'.7 If Emily Brontë's poetry was not granted serious attention in the Victorian period, as Emma Francis argues (chapter 2), the attempt to limit her work within the category of the Beautiful — a category that at the time would include the writings of Felicia Hemans, Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Barrett Browning — would seem now as an act of desperate containment, an evasion of those elements in Brontë's poetry that would subvert, as it were, the Kantian hierarchy from within. In this sense Derrida has yet another forerunner for his distinction between the two strategies of philosophical deconstruction: Bronte's subversion rests on the question of her literary 'style', a violent oscillation between the restricted economies of gender and Genius. And this too is the position that Sian MacFie investigates in her paper on women and vampirism (chapter 5); 'sucking us dry' could well read as the repressed in late Victorian fiction, the moment where the female subject is positioned in the threateningly ambiguous role of the destroyer, the seducer, the outcast and the diseased. In true Gothic style, the venom from her bite seeps into the wounds of healthy philosophy, spreading contamination into the circulatory logic of the cogito.

The subversion of 'male' authenticity via the return of the (female) body is a notion also utilized by Barbara Mathie in her examination of the fictional works of Clarice Lispector (chapter 11). Here, Mathie argues, it is the theories of the Bulgarian philosopher Julia Kristeva, in her critique of the alienated subject of phallogocentric discourse, that are most relevant to the reading of this important and provocative author. Through the simultaneous use of feminist, existentialist and post-modernist approaches, Mathie brings a new understanding to Lispector, revealing how all three readings can be applied to the disordering of ego-logical, stratified conceptions of the self within a 'non-patriarchal' mode of fictional language.

Where Georges Bataille writes, in a similar fashion, of a suppressed interest

in the material conditions of the body within the Western metaphysical tradition, the focus is once again on the tensional relation between two forces in the shared discourse of romanticism and postmodernism. Thus Philip Shaw, in 'Exceeding Romanticism' (chapter 1), argues that in attempting to construct philosophies of the intensive, or progressive impulse in romantic art, we inevitably create the grounds for a melancholic or nostalgic form of theoretical totality. This is brought through in Shaw's presentation of the themes of death and bodily decay as they occur in a cross-section of works ranging from A Zed and Two Noughts, by the postmodernist film-maker Peter Greenaway, through the writings of Wordsworth, Hegel and Ruskin to the post-Nietzschean tradition headed by Bataille and culminating in the works of Deleuze and Guattari.

The essays by Jamie Brassett and David Wilson also take as their cue a desire to exceed the reductive assumptions of the post-Kantian tradition. In 'The Spaced-out Subject: Bachelard and Perec' (chapter 13), Brassett outlines a critique of the subject in which space, as opposed to time, is regarded as the ordering principle of subjective experience. By telling 'stories in space' consciousness is experienced as 'heterogenous, fluid, and collective'. The notion of the 'self' that is thus developed through the 'topo-analysis' of these temporary or 'storeyed' formations is at once material, discontinuous and partial in form. If it escapes the process of idealization that we find in Kant it will be as a result of having escaped the spatio-temporal circle in which self is defined through its impossible relation to the other via the effects of difference.

Similarly, David Wilson, in a concluding essay on 'The Death of Orality and the Rise of the Literate "Subject" '(chapter 14), attempts a critique of the subject-self that has continued to form the basis of Enlightenment speculations on the nature of conscious experience. Utilizing the notion of 'orality' as it is developed in the work of Elizabeth Eisenstein and W.J. Ong, Wilson argues that it is only with the advent of print that our experience of individual subjectivity comes into being. In contrast to the view outlined in Brassett's essay, it is sound that functions as the 'unifying, involving phenomenon' and texts 'that allow for the possibility of abstraction (and hence alienation) by separating the knower from the known'. In other words, if the literate subject can reflect on the conditions of its own constitution through having taken recourse to the differential structure of writing, this will be, as Wilson suggests, at the expense of the values of collectivity and shared experience.

Several papers in this collection explore the themes of knowledge and self-creation. The work of Peter Stockwell and Dominique Costa (chapters 9 and 10), for example, are both concerned with how the subject is constructed through the process of reading. Through focusing on the varieties of subjective 'points of view' as these are produced in the text, both Stockwell and Costa treat the Kantian tradition as an idealized model that is actualized in the process of reading, in the study of the use and meaning of utterances in context (pragmatics). The conclusion is that consciousness is dependent in an ideal sense (the ratio cognoscendi) on narrative structures through which it can represent or reflect on its previous intentional states. At all times, however, the subjects presented in these respective analyses of 'The Night' (Ray Bradbury) and The Collector (John Fowles) are regarded as fragmented consciousnesses, whose reflections on meaning, truth and experience must remain provisional.

The incapacity of the subject to make its founded meanings of selfhood

coincide with itself through the structure of language therefore raises some important questions to do with the supposed ideality of the Kantian ego. Implicit within Stockwell's discussion, in particular, is a critique of the reading subject's claim to be able to transcend experience and operate as the 'disinterested', unified referent of intentionality that speculative reason must require if it is to affirm the universality of the moral law. This is a view often challenged by the experimental perspectives of the science-fiction genre. 'We' (whoever 'we' are: in SF this is explored through the use of alien, animal and other non-human perspectives) bring 'our' empirical assumptions and expectations to the text which are manipulated in turn by the use of 'focalization' and 'viewpoints', differential structures which provide only a discontinuous and partial knowledge of the 'truth', truths that interact with and are affected by the material circumstances of the interpreter. Who then is the ideal or protean reader and does the problematization of knowledge that we encounter in experimental writing really serve to deregulate the 'fundamental' conditions of this form of subjective experience?

Here, one is reminded especially of Pierre Bourdieu whose work in the field of the social sciences has provided literary theorists and historians with an insight into the philosophical assumptions that lie behind the claims of academic professionalism. In Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste (1984), Bourdieu must be credited for having exposed the ideological mechanism by which theories of knowledge and 'pure' reason locate themselves in the opposition between transcendent and empirical. As Bourdieu states (1984: 490): 'The antithesis between culture and bodily pleasure (or nature) is rooted in the opposition between the cultivated bourgeoisie and the people'. The truly cultivated man is therefore measured by his capacity for sublimation; low desires must be eschewed if judgement is to transcend social relations. Yet every work of art is a conditioned object, including the philosophical or critical text. It also follows that every act of reading is conditioned and that even the most radical questionings announced by philosophy 'are in fact circumscribed by the interests linked to membership in the philosophical field' (p. 496):

'Empirical' interest enters into the composition of the most disinterested pleasures of pure taste, because the principle of the pleasure derived from these refined games for refined players [here Bourdieu singles out Derrida's attempts to transgress the third *Critique* through the excess of his 'seductive' style] lies, in the last analysis, in the denied experience of a social relationship of membership and exclusion. (Bourdieu 1984: 499)

In this respect we remember that the claim to have 'exceeded' Kant or Hegel or Derrida must first begin with the acceptance of a professional contract. As 'radical' readers we may agree to transgress the stock of consecrated texts from which the philosophers have learnt their trade but our readings, nevertheless, act as symbolic strategies which derive their sense of legitimacy from having operated within the terms dictated by the professional field. This rooted opposition between the reasonable terms of academia and that 'certain step of the dance' (Derrida 1982: 27) with which poststructuralism would put the subject into play, leads critical thought towards an inevitable encounter with the role of the political.