

**Toward an Aesthetic Approach to *Amodern* Subjectivity,  
with Some Suggestions Concerning Onto-Theology**

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Note: These are preliminary and uncorrected remarks

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I wish to begin with a choice Heidegger makes in section 34 of *Being and Time*, the section entitled *Being-There and Discourse, Language*. In this section he presents the following query: “philosophical research must resolve to ask what kind of Being goes with language in general. Is it a kind of equipment ready-to-hand within-the-world, or has it Dasein’s kind of Being, or is it neither of these?”<sup>1</sup>

What I wish to highlight here is that, in this simple statement, Heidegger is presenting himself, and indeed the whole of philosophy, with a Promethean choice: is language a *tool* within the world, or is language *itself* the world?

Heidegger’s answer to the question is that language finds its ontological locus in Dasein’s state of being.<sup>2</sup> In other words, language itself is constitutive of a world, and is not merely a tool within the world. Language (and we see this not just in Heidegger but also in Wittgenstein and their several and varied progeny) becomes the totality of the human experience. Language becomes constitutive of who we are—to follow this trend to the later Heidegger, *language speaks us*.

I wish to take up this claim of Heidegger’s and follow it through some conclusions. In particular, I want to highlight some thoughts that elide and contrast with

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1962) 209.

<sup>2</sup> Heidegger, 210.

Heidegger's contention along the line of inquiry that lead us to the dyad of modernism/postmodernism and the question of the relation of faith to identity.

There is no proper time here to develop the gestures I am going to make in the next few minutes, but let me emphasize here that I believe they can and should be developed in a more thoroughgoing project. As it currently stands, I am going to say some things that are easily rebuffed as too-swift and too-facile. I ask for your indulgence, and we will develop some of these matters in the question period and beyond.

So the first thing I want to say is that I am intrigued by some of the comments Sean made the other evening about the difficulties he finds in the entire Heideggerian project with regard to subjectivity. With his permission, I want to make my own, sympathetic exploration of his critique, which I understand to be this: the Heideggerian critique of presence, as it is accepted and taken up by both his champions and his detractors, funds a certain sense of subjectivity that—either negatively or positively— informs both modernity and postmodernity, broadly stated. What do I mean by this? Well, to use Sean's words, they fund a certain bourgeois-capitalist notion of the subject that functions equally well—though in tactily differing ways—in modernity and postmodernity. In modernity, this subject can self-describe and has access to reflexive knowledge of self. In postmodernity, the subject self-narrates and is ironically decentered. Ethical critique in the modern turn becomes the myth of progress, and the de(con)struction of this myth-as-metanarrative in postmodernity leads not to moral outrage but to the shrug of consumerism. (It should be noted that I am invoking a very Jamesonian notion of postmodernity here<sup>3</sup>--though there is certainly a form of this

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<sup>3</sup> See, then, Frederic Jameson's *Postmodernism: or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. A perfect example to the kind of postmodern ironic shrug I am referring to comes in the extra features disk of the

critique also to be found in the likes of Bruno Latour's work,<sup>4</sup> as well as in the work of Hardt and Negri<sup>5</sup>).

A result of this is that—whether we are talking about modernity or postmodernity—the notion of the subject is one that is detached and ironic toward commitments. In modernism, this is the perfect liberal citizen who abandons strong conviction for the sake of participation in the ‘marketplace of ideas.’ In postmodernity, the subject's perspective is simply one-among-many, with the vulgar conclusion that nothing is ultimately of transcendent value and no position is articulate in its ‘correctness’ over another. (Again, yes, oversimplifications, but necessary for the moment.)

I think that we can find one basis for this sort of subjectivity in precisely this Heideggerian construal of language-as-world. In modernity, this language-worldness is picked up as the notion that both self and world are transparent in their describability (be it the hubris of scientific representationalism or the “realism” esteemed in modern literature)—the real is rendered linguistic, and that which is beyond description is, in a cognitive sense, beyond existence. Postmodernity picks up the ‘endless play of signifiers’ such that the ‘real’ disappears in endless hermeneutic gesticulations. What we are left with is either a base cataphasis that denies the transcendent, or a base apophasis that denies that anything is actually immanent and, shrugging, what do we care anyway?

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recently released *DisInformation: The Complete Series* DVD set. The disk chronicles a conference of ultra-hip cultural mavens, led by Bruce Metzger, who each in their way extols the same mantra: “We’re smart, we’re cool, and we’re pissed off at the conservatives. But instead of rebelling against the system, we’re buying in. We’re hip, and the simpletons will pay us a lot of money because they need our hipness. We can buy toys, and our lives will be more comfortable because of our parasitism on “the system”.”

<sup>4</sup> See Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993)

<sup>5</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000) 64-65.

Being offered the duality of modernity/postmodernity is a polite ruse—a Bolshevik/Menshevik arrangement. I am with Jameson, Latour and Negri that this dyad that seems to encompass the whole of our possibilities might actually be two branches off the same tree, that (following Jameson) “postmodernism is itself one more stage of modernism proper”<sup>6</sup>—although where, for him, the common thread running through them is the matter of a certain development of capitalism, I want instead to locate the common thread in this turn to language-as-world.

Because, you see, once Heidegger has made this choice, it is inevitable that the project of de-onto-theology be taken up. Section 34 has firmly taken hold when apophasis is constituted as a failure of God’s revelation, rather than as a failure of our conception of language. We go looking for a language-world in which God can live and, failing to find it, abandon the notion of God’s positive being altogether. What is it in our beholden-ness to language that entices us to make this leap? Why are we looking for a language-world in which God can live, instead of using our language as a tool to live in God’s world? In our irony and our apophasis, our language loses us God. In our rush to de-onto-theologize, our being loses communion with God, and our postmodern sensibilities encourage us to shrug and no longer care.

This is a crisis of representation, factored by a calculated and willing blindness on the part of our mechanisms of representation. Our language and our perception of Being are in collusion against us (a factor, perhaps, of the distorting effects of sin). We have allowed ourselves to be possessed by language in such a manner that we have lost the being the very presence, of God.

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<sup>6</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism: or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke UP, 1993) 4

What I want to suggest then, briefly, is that there is something to be recovered in the reconsideration of Heidegger's choice. What is to be recovered is, I think, both a way to construe the question of subjectivity that does not fall prey to conviction-abandonment or irony, and a return to the possibility—and necessity—of God's positive being. In other words, I want to posit a subject *coram Deo*, and the *Deo* I'm referring to is a God of specificity, of presence, of material being; in short, a *de-de-ontologized* God.

So—again following Latour and Negri—I want to pursue this idea that modernism and postmodernism are, in fact, of a piece, and that there is a *true* alternative to this false dyad available. This alternative is called by Negri “anti-modernity” and in Latour it is called “non-modernism”.<sup>7</sup> Because Latour's terminology sometimes steps on the toes of Negri's terms, for the purposes of this discussion I'll use a terminology derived from Timothy S. Murphy, who calls what we're talking about here *amodernism*.<sup>8</sup> So, from Murphy, a quick definition of what amodernism is:

think of [amodernism] as a heterogeneous term, like “amoral” in relation to “moral” and “immoral.” Amodernism, like the reflexive postmodernism we already recognize, accepts the failure of modernist ends (for instance, the resolution of gender, class, and ethnic conflicts and the concomitant spiritual unification of society) and means (for instance, the regeneration of myth as a centering structure), without taking the additional step of homogenizing all remaining difference into some version of Ferdinand de Saussure's negatively defined linguistic paradigm...[in other words, amodernism would claim that]

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<sup>7</sup> This can become confusing, for in Latour's work “anti-modernism” is interchangeable with postmodernism. Hence the possibility of confusion when Latour is put alongside Negri.

<sup>8</sup> Timothy S. Murphy, *Wising Up the Marks: The Amodern William S. Burroughs* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1997) 2.

postmodernism is not adequate, [since its disavowal of mass politics, for example] remains complicit with capital because it offers no way out of the system of domination that constitutes the present social order.<sup>9</sup>

There are a lot of directions we can take this as a project that I think would be fruitful, but tonight I specifically want to focus this construal of the amodern subjectivity as a contrast in possibilities to what has arisen in (post)modernism<sup>10</sup> precisely out of this choice in Heidegger's section 34. I think one means by which to show this contrast succinctly is to deploy a series of aesthetic readings—here particularly of the playwrights Alfred Jarry and Antonin Artaud, as well as the novelist William S. Burroughs. What I hope will become clear in each of these all-too-brief-gestures is a common aesthetic: a subjectivity that is specifically *resistant* to language-as-world and which seeks to chasten language into human use and a proper scope of representation. In each case, these three exemplars present the negative side of this sort of amodern subjectivity, which I will suggest finds its only proper and positive expression in the notion of God's presence to the subject constituted *coram Deo*. But more on that in a few moments. First, with your indulgence, I will offer my readings.

Alfred Jarry gained immediate notoriety for his proto-absurdist play *Ubu Roi*, which only saw two performances in its initial run in Paris and was not staged again until after Jarry's death in 1907. The central character of the play, Pere Ubu, is a shambling grotesque, a chaotic monster-dictator who twists politics, relationships, and language itself into meaningless (but deadly) spirals. As *art*, as an aesthetic expression, it is very easy to trace the direct line from *Ubu Roi* to the Dadaists, surrealists, and thus to later

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<sup>9</sup> Murphy, *Wising* 2.

<sup>10</sup> Following Murphy I will use (post)modernism as a shorthand term to encompass the linearity between the modern and the postmodern, discussed above.

French post-structuralism. So, on the surface, it is possible to characterize the play as a sort of proto-postmodern expression. Language and plot, both, are tossed to the wolves of the endless play of signification. The audience is left to its own devices to make up the meaning.

But something curious occurs in the life of Jarry himself. In the wake of the two performances of *Ubu*, Jarry begins to take on the mannerisms, dress, style of speech, and appearance of Pere Ubu. (There is an unnerving memory I have of the mid '80's where Paul Reubens never seemed to come out of his Pee Wee Herman character. In particular I remember a Tonight Show interview where Reubens eerily embodied Pee Wee through the whole thing, despite Johnny Carson's best efforts to politely ask him to drop the schtick. But we can assume that, in some moments, Reubens was still Reubens in private. Jarry's embodiment of Ubu seemed to go even beyond this, invading every moment and facet of his public *and* private life).

Jarry gives us one facet of what I want to characterize as the amodern subject: Jarry demonstrates a total and non-ironic embodiment of an identity, an identity that refuses completely to be self-transparent. There is no core integrity to the Ubu persona: it is pure chaos. And yet this embodiment is not taken on as some Nietzschean self-narration which might be laid aside or function as one of many personae. Jarry seemed totally committed to living, and indeed, dying, as Ubu. So this draws for us the first aspect of the amodern subject—a subject with no illusions of a linguistic structure to secure meaning (contra Wittgenstein) yet wholly committed to the presentation of a *self*. It is this full-commitment that will form one thread common to each of the three figures discussed here, and so I highlight it in Jarry.

(As an aside, let me just say that in referring to this matter of ‘irony’ I have in mind very much Richard Rorty’s notion of that term, where the subjectivity he describes is one that can always choose otherwise than that-which-it-is in some sense. For example, the ‘marginalized’ in Rorty’s view are always in some sense *self*-marginalized, etc. There is more to say about this, no time here to say it.)

So let’s move briefly to Antonin Artaud. Artaud I find fascinating because he also evinces this full-commitment to an aesthetic persona—he is literally imprisoned in a sanitarium because of it. But moreover, in this persona as well as in his writings, Artaud mounts a full and direct *assault* on language. He is completely suspicious of it—he founds a theater (notably, he calls it the *Alfred Jarry Theater*) and uses this as a launching point for a new theatrical attack (there is no other word for it) on language itself. This is the theater of cruelty, which intends to rip language from meaning—not in a postmodern direction, where the signifiers play—but precisely to *re-humanize* language, to make language again serve a *human* reality that is not beholden to language for containment and representation. For Artaud, “language was to be dissolved from words with definite meaning, into a substance of multiple gestures and cries that had a more direct, more visceral capacity for expression”.<sup>11</sup> The theater of cruelty distrusts words.<sup>12</sup>

Under the assumed dyad of modernism/postmodernism this refusal of language can only appear as nihilism or madness. But this is precisely not what Artaud is advocating, because Artaud is not beholden to the ontology of language for meaningfulness. His ontology is rather an ontology which starts with the given-ness of the human body. Using this given-ness, Artaud then posits the possibility of a body

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<sup>11</sup> Stephen Barber, *Antonin Artaud: Blows and Bombs* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993) 55.

<sup>12</sup> Barber, *Artaud* 44.

perfected beyond bodily limitations—organ-less and immortal (interestingly, as I read Artaud on this point, the body he desires sounds very much like what we in some Christian circles would term the ‘resurrection body’). Artaud screams and shrieks to enact a body no longer *limited* or mediated by language—a body *more* articulate than language: a body reduced *in se* to a face. This is not nihilism. This is not apophasis. This is the height of a movement that begins in the cataphatic but is not limited to the cataphatic: an articulate particularity, a signature that can be *read*.

So from Artaud, then, an echoing of Jarry’s absolute commitment, and now paired with this deep critique of language as the defining point or world-boundary of the human. And I think this is again indicative of this amodernism I want to examine with you—that it takes its ontological anchor in creatureliness, in material embodiment, not spoken-ness. For Artaud, there is absolutely something outside the text, and that something is the human body. But what should be noted is that Artaud had a clear sense of the *self-recreation* of the body. There is still in Artaud, despite his break with the language-world, a strong sense of personal *agency*. And it is with this highlight that I now would like to turn to William S. Burroughs.

It is in Burroughs that I find the culmination of the *negative* form of the amodern subject I am examining here. We find here first of all, as in Jarry and Artaud, the complete commitment to a non-ironic aesthetic persona. It is a matter of some difficulty for literary critics to delineate where the *literary* Burroughs ends and the ‘actual’ Burroughs begins. Like Jarry, Burroughs’s identity is in parity with the characters he wrote. In this case, that means Burroughs was a hyperintelligent homosexual ultra-libertarian medically-educated drug fiend, just like his character Bill Lee. Moreover, like

Jarry, Burroughs does not ‘undertake’ the living of this persona in a way that leaves the observer thinking it is a mere affectation. It is a whole life, a twenty-four hour, seven-day a week identity, undertaken without Rortian irony.

A second point of note is Burroughs’s intense allergy to language. Burroughs’s work is often, inappropriately, collected into the body of postmodern literature. I stand with others who contest this classification, in particular because of Burroughs’s tacit definition of what language is. Unlike the postmoderns, language is not a ‘mobile army of metaphors’ or ‘the endless play of signifiers’ begging for our suspicious hermeneutic to step in. No. *Language is a virus*. It is a parasite that inhabits the human body and makes it do things. Burroughs does not celebrate language. He resists it. He fights it. He, in various ways, throughout his work, enters into plots to literally *destroy* language.

So here we see the parallel to Artaud, by which in Burroughs’s work there is the absolute refusal of Heidegger’s position of language-as-world. Burroughs would hear the Heideggerian claim that “language speaks us” and nod ruefully, reminding us that the ideal position of the drug pusher is when he ceases to sell the product to the junkie, and instead sells the junkie to the product. To concede our humanity to the virus of language is to fail in the fight against what Burroughs termed “the Ugly Spirit.”<sup>13</sup>

The piece that Burroughs gives us beyond Artaud arises here. With a similar antipathy to language, and a similar location of ontology in the pleased and pained body, Burroughs does not follow Artaud into the uplifting of personal creative agency. The Burroughsian subject is not heroic in the sense of being autonomous and self-defining. Rather, in Burroughs, the subject is precisely the site of *possession*. Possession

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<sup>13</sup> The “Ugly Spirit” forms the negative muse of all of Burroughs’s work. His claim is that this possessive entity was at work the day he killed his wife, and has thus formed the seed of all his writing—writing which is an attempt to interrogate and defeat the Ugly Spirit.

takes many forms in Burroughs, but its main locus centers in the model of addiction, what Burroughs terms “the Algebra of Need.”

This Need highlights absolutely the loss that is at the center of the modern and postmodern self—the insatiable hole which must be filled (and the Need has *ontological* effect: consider the early routine in *Naked Lunch* centered on the character of Willie the Disk, whose body is literally transformed by addiction into a monstrous, consuming homonculous, or any number of other characters whose bodies, as sites of possession, become disastrously disarranged). *Contra* postmodernist sensibilities, the decentering of the stable self is not celebrated (a la Mark C. Taylor), rather it is shown in Burroughs to be the horror and the nightmare that it, quite actually, is.

The Burroughsian subject is the epicenter of a technological and by turns cosmic struggle for *control*. The modern notion of autonomy and agency is undermined by the Algebra of Need, and the postmodern shrug of a decentered, ironic self is interrogated, quite literally, in Burroughs fanciful routines about spies and secret agents. Both the self of liberal modernism and the self of self-narrated postmodernism assume that identities can be interchanged with little consequence. Burroughs turns this notion of interchange into a farced set of routines in which covert agents are trapped and broken by this very interchangeability. For example, in one routine the infamous character Dr. Benway discusses “the case of a female agent who forgot her real identity and merged with her cover story”—where the technique of breaking the agency of the subject is predicated precisely upon the subject’s attempt to be self-defining and ironic about identity:

An agent is trained to deny his agent identity by asserting his cover story. So why not use psychic jiu-jitsu and go along with him? Suggest that his cover story is

his identity and that he has no other. His agent identity becomes unconscious, that is, *out of his control*...<sup>14</sup>

What Burroughs is critiquing here is the very possibility of the ironic identity structure—the notion of a subject that is able to assume multiple identities without commitment to any of them, identities without consequence (which seems to be the ideal of both modernist ‘liberal’ politics and postmodernist ‘identity’ politics). What seems tacit in Burroughs, that I want to make explicit here, is the necessity of a *non-ironic* self, an identification of subjectivity that acknowledges the solidity of the subject in commitment, precisely because the subject is constantly at risk of co-opted agency. The amodern subject we find pointed to in Burroughsian subjectivity is an agent *who is at risk of possession*.

And a point of contrast should be made here with Artaud: Artaud thinks it is absolutely the addict’s right to be addicted—again, personal agency. Burroughs absolutely does not romanticize addiction in this way. You have the sense throughout the Burroughs corpus that addiction and possession is a *fact*, but it’s a fact that Burroughs would like to see eradicated—from his life and from the world. What Burroughs is unflinching about, however, is that the drug itself (whatever ‘drug’ we might imagine) is not the problem. Any of the specificities—heroin, sex, violent cannibalistic exploitation—these are each symptomatic of *control itself*, this possession, this Algebra of Need. The addicted subjectivity, in Burroughs, desperately needs a cure that the subject herself cannot provide.

To bring this to a theological point, then, the kind of positive, addicted subjectivity we see in Burroughs is what, in much Christian discourse, we consider to be

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<sup>14</sup> William S. Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990) 26.

the state of subjective agency enslaved to sin. And, just as in Burroughs, this enslavement is rendered simultaneously as a spiritual and a material fact. In Burroughs's work, addicts transform into centipedes, mutate grotesquely, and rot while still alive—the possession we see in Burroughs's work points to a *materialized* spirituality. The Algebra of Need is the tool of the Ugly Spirit (or they are in fact the same entity), and interaction with this spirit deforms ontology. This is, I contend, the *negative* form of an equivalent claim that comes to us in Christian doctrine, particularly what we might call an Alexandrian construal of subjectivity: sin is a spiritual force with a *material effect*, and we are not able to cure ourselves of the ontological distortion that sin creates.

What is essential to such a view is that there is a subject capable of being possessed, of being ontologically distorted. This is, I hold, precisely the sort of subjectivity we lose in the following of Heidegger's choice in section 34 to make language our world, to allow language to become that-which-speaks-us. The subjectivity of modernism and postmodernism, coming in the wake of this move, loses us precisely the sort of subject who can be the site of materialized spirit. In positing this amodern alternative, I am attempting to point to a non-ironic, committed subjectivity that can be aware of the possibility of its own possession (i.e., the risk of its being-possessed) without falling back on some autonomous notion of agency (and here I would point to the apostle Paul's claim that we are always either slaves to righteousness or slaves to sin as an example of this sort of awareness).

Now there has not been sufficient space to develop these points—though I want to emphasize again that I firmly believe they *can* be developed, and should be—and there is

not time to adequately make the final move I want to make here, but let me gesture toward it, in any case.

Because I think the payoff of this amodernist subjectivity is that it reconditions the relation of language and Deity. To the extent that we allow language to form the whole of who we are (Heidegger's choice) we are committing idolatry—we are under possession by what Burroughs calls the virus. The effect of this idolatry is locatable precisely in the conclusion that we must de-ontologize our theological positions. God is lost precisely as a *material* reality as a result of a certain set of linguistic necessities.

But if language is chastened, if it is a tool, instead of a world, this does not occur. When our language concludes that God must not exist *in se*, we can then say, aha, the tool is faulty, and not that God is beyond Being. We function quite well in a world with faulty tools—we do so every day. I am suspicious how well we have fared in a world without the positive material presence of God.

If we accept these notions that are arising out of my read of this Burroughsian subjectivity—that there is a negative material spirituality that can possess us and effect us ontologically, distorting us—then my suggestion is the answer to this problem is precisely *not* the shrug of the decentered, postmodern subject, nor the attempt of autonomous agency in the modern liberal subject. The answer is precisely the recovery of a positive material spirituality that can call us and effect us ontologically, restoring us to wholeness.

One possibility—I think a very viable one—for this sort of material spirituality is the Alexandrian notions of the Eucharistic presence. It is exactly the being-ness of divinity within the physically present elements of bread and cup that enacts ontological

reformation of that which has been distorted by sin. But this ontological change is predicated upon the *materiality* of divinity as a spiritual presence.

God's transcendence does not rest in simply being-other to the world (or being-other than Being)—the hyperbolic claim of realized modernity and postmodernity. God succeeds precisely to be the immanence that *transcends God's otherness into the world*. The transcendence of God's radical otherness to Being is precisely the God who incarnates, and the God who becomes present in the saving bread and cup of the Eucharist.

To conceive of the subject in a way that it is *actually* distorted by sin and rehabilitated by the spiritual-material presence is to conceive of a subject comported Eucharistically and doxologically—a *creature*. Not an autonomous or ironic subjectivity, but a literal material *site* that can be *called* (and which runs always the risk of possession). Such a comported creature *uses* language as one means to live in a world where God is ever-present—realizing fully that language is an inadequate tool to describe God and God's world (and here we find Burroughs's allergy to language meeting the discipline of the Trappist and the reality of the affirmation of the wholeness of the deaf-mute in God's creation). The inadequacy of description, however, never clouds the material reality of God's saving presence.

Such a creature is one that lives—not in a prison-house of language—but *coram Deo*, before God. Such a creature is centered liturgically, not linguistically. This, I think, is a promise within our reach if we return to section 34 and make a different choice about language.

I have already talked too much, and there is much more to say, but this will give you a sense, I hope, of where this project is heading. I look forward to Travis's comments, and to the discussion which will follow. I thank you for your attention.