

This article was downloaded by: [172.10.224.138]

On: 05 July 2014, At: 07:41

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rrmx20>

Out of melancholia: notes on Judith Butler's *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*

Pierre Macherey

Published online: 04 Jun 2010.

To cite this article: Pierre Macherey (2004) Out of melancholia: notes on Judith Butler's *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society*, 16:1, 7-17, DOI: [10.1080/0893569042000193371](https://doi.org/10.1080/0893569042000193371)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0893569042000193371>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

Out of Melancholia: Notes on Judith Butler's *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*

Pierre Macherey

Translated by Jason Smith

This review of Judith Butler's The Psychic Life of Power was first written as a presentation of Butler's ideas to the study group on "La Philosophie au sens large" that Macherey sponsors at the University of Lille 3. The review focuses on Butler's critique of the modern conception of power, the logic of "subjection," and the "tropic subject"; the Althusserian theory of ideological interpellation and the psychic dimensions of power; and the role of mourning and melancholia in constituting subjected subjects.

Key Words: Judith Butler, Power, Ideology

I would like this presentation of Judith's Butler's book to be an homage to an other America, the one that questions itself and reflects, the one we can, without a second thought, feel completely in step with.

Let's first of all take note of the important group of texts treated by this book. It essentially brings together chapter 4 of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* ("The Truth of Self-Certainty," presenting the path from the struggle between master and slave to the unhappy consciousness, by way of the experiences of skepticism and stoicism); paragraphs 16 ff. of the second essay of Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* (exhibiting the parallel genesis of consciousness and bad conscience)¹; a set of Freud's texts (principally "Mourning and Melancholia," *The Ego and the Id*, "Introduction to Narcissism," and *Civilization and Its Discontents*); Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, and Althusser's study on "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." It has become rather rare to see these references treated with no drama or prejudice on a level playing field, while avoiding any simple amalgamation. Althusser was very interested in a Freud reread over Lacan's shoulder; but he repudiated Hegel, and Nietzsche is in fact absent from his horizon. Foucault, like Deleuze, claimed to be Nietzschean by rejecting everything that might recall Hegelianism and whatever

1. [Throughout this text, Macherey exploits the term *conscience*, whereas in English two terms are required: "conscience" and "consciousness." In German, one speaks of *Gewissen* and *Bewusstsein*, respectively—tr.]

Marx might have inherited from it; and though he was very prudent in his declarations on the subject of psychoanalysis, it is clear that he avoided it like the plague. Since the 1970s, in France (but also in Italy and Germany), these barriers have been imposed on the work of theoretical reflection in the most inflexible forms, so that it has in a certain sense become forbidden to show the lines of communication between the various contributions to the questions of conscience, consciousness and subjectivity by authors as different as Hegel, Nietzsche, and Freud. Judith Butler's book helps lift this interdiction. This book, which is based on an attentive and rigorous study of the texts just mentioned, begins with an initial, implicit postulate: at bottom, these texts deal with the same object, even if they do not approach it in the same manner or on the same grounds. This should lead us to link their contributions in order to show how they overlap in ways that might turn out to be illuminating. To link does not mean to homogenize. In her own way, Butler practices a symptomatic reading, a reading interested above all in what a text necessarily does not say because its own logic prevents it from doing so; a reading that therefore takes up a discourse at the point where it confronts its own limits, limits that bring out its essential signification. For example, Butler's apparently acrobatic rapprochement of Hegel and Nietzsche, which allows her to combine the thematics of the unhappy consciousness and bad conscience in order to show the role each plays in the genesis of conscience, in no way results in the collapsing together of these two thematics, as if they were fundamentally analogous and differed solely on the plane of presentation. Instead, she brings out what each text has at stake in the debate, the result being that what one says, the other doesn't, and vice versa. We are led to ask whether, instead of positing a superficial, substitutive relation between the texts, it might be possible to make them react on one another in such a way that new theoretical views emerge from their reaction. Likewise, having Foucault, Althusser, and Freud work on each other brings out a complex field of investigation that at once implies, without confounding, the questions of ideology, discipline, and the different forms of work-on-self involved in the psychic operations of loss and foreclosure. To begin, then, let's quickly say that it is refreshing to see how all the divisions that our bad habits (and hidden agendas) consider unavoidable are in fact artificial, and only serve to shut down theoretical investigation under the abusive pretext that this makes it more rigorous. Judith Butler's book offers a salutary lesson in breadth and freedom of mind to French readers who lived through the intellectual events of the 1970s—there are still a few survivors left—and who have been the target of the anathema those events provoked: this lesson opens a path to a thought released from every a priori, one that consequently has the chance to become more inventive and more fecund, one open to possible developments to come.

The fundamental problematic of Judith Butler's book is concentrated in its initially enigmatic title, *The Psychic Life of Power*. The modern reflection on power, insofar as it has distanced itself from the mysticisms of alienation, has tended to depsychologize and desubjectivize its investigation as much as possible. This is why interpreting the development of Foucault's work often forces us to ask how Foucault could pass from the question of power to that of the subject without renouncing anything, despite the fact that he always insisted—apparently without being understood—that ultimately one and the same question is at stake. Dissociating the

question of power from that of the subject amounts to accepting, with no critical examination, being situated in a theoretical space traversed by the distinction between an interior (the self, where consciousness, for lack of a better word, and more specifically self-consciousness, dominates) and an exterior (the set of social relations dominated by power), all the while supposing this distinction to be ontologically founded. Descartes distinguished soul and body in the same way. In both cases, it is very difficult to understand the relation between these two worlds or orders in their fixed confrontation. Whence the illusion it is necessary, in order to better understand the laws proper to one of these orders, to protect this order against all contamination coming from the other—a gesture amounting to the transformation of a distinction into a relation of exclusion. This gesture, however, confronts theoretical reflection with insurmountable dilemmas which, in the end, stall its development.

In order to give a more precise content to this difficulty, let's evoke what constitutes one of the pivots of Butler's reflection: the Althusserian theory of the ideological interpellation of individuals as subjects.² The essence of this theory is concentrated in the concrete evocation of the scene of interpellation experienced by any passerby in the street: you walk along, looking ahead and minding your own business, when a voice from behind imperiously shouts: "Hey, you there!" Immediately, without even taking the time to reflect, you turn around, perhaps out of a feeling of latent guilt—we always have something more or less grave to reproach ourselves with—which makes you instinctively interpret the call as a legal injunction coming from an upholder of public order before whom you must, as one says, "respond" or "account" for yourself and your actions. What happens in the course of this brief sequence? The individual who was the passerby, from the fact of having felt convoked by the call and forced to respond to it by turning around has, without even having to say a single word, become a "subject," has both recognized itself and made itself recognized as a "subject" by taking place, "its" place, in the symbolic order marked by the law and signified by the force of the voice before which it can do nothing other than "face up to it." Let's remark in passing that the configuration proper to this scene is in some sense the inversion of the analytic cure. There, a tearful subject recounts its subjective histories to the mute presence it senses behind it, a presence it cannot confront but nevertheless appeals to—seeking to no longer be the subject, the bad subject, the terribly "messed up" subject it feels it is, wanting to start over, to set itself straight.

What interests Butler about the scene of "interpellation" upon which Althusser based his explanation of the individual's becoming-subject (in which the individual finds its "correct" position, the one it is assigned in the power relation imposed by the intermediary of language and represented by the voice issuing an injunction) is precisely the point at which it reaches an impasse. In presenting the gesture of turning around as automatically performed, as if it were a bodily reflex involving

2. Louis Althusser, *Positions* (Paris: Éditions Sociales, 1976), pp. 110 ff. [In English, see "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," in *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), pp. 174 ff.—tr.]

what Bordieu would call a *habitus*, this explanation erases all reference to what, as one says, goes on in the head of the person involved (Althusser himself declared that he was trying to understand ideology by subtracting it from every logic having to do with "ideas"). What "goes on" in the person's head may not be clearly conscious, but it necessarily accompanies the individual's behavior even if it is not, properly speaking, its cause. The implication is that if this psychic process were to take place under different conditions, the movement of turning around—which makes the subject enter a field in which it is qualified as such and consents to this precisely because it is incapable of doing otherwise—would not take place or would not have the same sense.

It might be interesting to compare the scenario just presented with a situation that is completely different but which nevertheless also establishes a relation of authority combined with a recognition of identity. A teacher faces his or her class and, representing the legal order, interpellates someone in the back of the class by pointing a finger and using the same formula, "Hey you there!": one of the teacher's flock does not seem to be sufficiently attentive and is causing a disruption. The student turns around, with innocence written on his or her face, and pretends in perfectly bad faith to look behind for the veritable addressee of the reprimand he or she impudently seeks to slip away from, knowing all too well, and for good reason, to whom the reprimand is addressed. Maybe, if the injunction issued by the teacher becomes more insistent, the student provocatively responds to it with a "Who, me?" delivered with the tone of the consummate comedian. In a Lacanian language, one would say that the passerby who turns around in order to respond to the law's injunction accomplishes his or her entry into the symbolic (where identities are accounted for) whereas the student, who also turns around but under completely different conditions, gets around the obstacle by escaping into an imaginary that exploits similarities and their deceptions. Both attitudes leave the place of the "real" vacant—they leave apparently unoccupied that cursed part of the psyche that, remaining inaccessible both to the order of the symbolic and to the mirror play of the imaginary, definitively avoids the necessity of responding to the injunction and constitutes in each of us the final, primordial, and perfectly unlivable refuge of freedom. Whence the following provisional conclusion: the same gesture of turning around completely changes value according to the contexts in which it takes place and in relation to the forms through which this context is thus reflected, insofar as these forms allow different aspects of the psychic makeup or machinery to come into play.

What sense, then, does it make to speak of the "psychic life of power"? This phrase signifies a particular interest in the interweaving of the two aspects concerned in the unfolding of the process constituting subjects under the authority and responsibility of a power—both the imperative call coming from without (supposing the constitution of alterity), and the inner rumination going on at the same time (in the context of the self's relation to itself). This relation does not simply consist in the passive elaboration of an image, of a more or less separate and subsequent representation of an established situation, but actively participates in the becoming and the resolution of the problem this situation poses. In this way, the artificial barrier between what is supposed to come from without and what happens

within is removed or, at the very least, blurred: the most properly psychic side of the phenomenon finds itself marked at its inmost point by the law of the other while, inversely, the way such a law imposes itself is closely coordinated with the modalities of subjective reflection or rumination, without which its end would not be reached. The psychic life of power is therefore the permanent movement of coming and going from the exterior toward the interior and interior to exterior, a movement which—as occurs when following the edges of a Möbius strip—undoes their separation and makes them permanently communicate with one another, in the absence of any impermeable border separating them once and for all.

*

In order to give a more precise and determined sense of the way the psychic life of power works, Butler uses the concept of “subjection”: this expression underscores the fact that the subject is not—contrary to the spontaneous representation it has of itself—an initial, primary given, a stable foundation, but the effect of a complex process on which its constitution depends. This concept has already been introduced by both Althusser and Foucault, although from different perspectives.³ Althusser developed it in relation to ideology insofar as its functioning is bound to State apparatuses; Foucault related it to a diffuse disciplinary power that was neither ideological nor dependent on central agencies of decision. Beyond these cleavages separating diverse theories of subjection, Butler locates a single and same problem whose examination yields, through all its different figures, the traits of a deep logic of subjection. This logic is a paradoxical one, permanently playing on an ambivalence: on the one hand, the subject implicated in the process of subjection constitutes the latter’s result or destination; but, on the other hand, in order for this result to be obtained, in order for the process to be able to unfold “normally” and exercise its normalizing function, it is necessary that it be applied to a preexisting being whose transformation it carries out by making it pass from a potential to an actual subject. This “dialectic” of the given and the produced, of trajectory and target, both defines the dynamic of subjection and at the same time seems to constitute the principal obstacle to its unfolding. There seems to be an insurmountable contradiction, and the psychic life of power is nothing other than the encrypted staging and performing of this contradiction permanently at work within it.

This contradiction is figured by the operatory gesture of turning around we have seen concretely at work in all the previously evoked examples. Whether it in fact physically turns around toward what is behind it or refrains from doing so for whatever reason (a specific intention, whether it is avowed or unavowable), the “subject” is also a subject that is mentally turned around, a “twisted” subject. It is totally preoccupied with what is behind it, drawn to what precedes it and therefore posited as independent, even if this independence is dependent upon the movement

3. [The English translation of Foucault’s *Surveiller et punir—Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, 1979)—translates *assujettissement* as “subjection,” whereas Butler at times uses “subjectivation,” as on page 11. Here, “subjection” is used—tr.]

of interest the subject obsessively devotes to it—an obsession that is not incidental, but a necessary movement of return that is deeply inscribed in the structure commanding the subject's mode of existence.

It could be said that this is the way the subject deals with an *other* who calls it from without and to which it responds by constituting itself as subject. But this is also how it deals with *itself*, responding to itself and even turning back on and against itself, according to the modalities proper to a subject rolled up [*retroussé*] in itself and vulnerable to being "rolled" or coming unraveled [*detrroussé*], a constitutively ambivalent subject looking forward and back at the same time, producing itself as what it already is. The subject never takes leave of the contradiction tearing it apart, the contradiction that is the very condition of its being insofar as the divide between same and other crosses right through it. And it's here that both Hegel reread in light of Nietzsche and Nietzsche reread in light of Hegel offer a valuable lesson, insofar as they show how self-consciousness, the "good" conscience, grasped in its becoming, is only ever the flip side of another conscience which is its bad conscience. It is therefore the interiorization or deployment of a conflict that is also taking place outside it, its truth being in the coincidence of these two aspects, a coincidence which is anything save easy to live with: coincidence that is the key to our ordinary "subjective" problems.

This figure of turning back is what in rhetoric (Butler's primary academic field) is called a "trope." In Greek, the word *tropos* means "turn," and more particularly a special manner of expressing oneself. The grammarian Du Marsais took this ancient word in 1729 and used it in the title of his *Traité des tropes*. There he explains how figurative language, the "turning" of phrases (today we might speak of a "tortuous" style) characterizing the indirect manner of expression proper to poetry and its infinite convolutions, had to be the originary form of language, out of which emerged, after a long and difficult evolution, the simplified and straightened out, "correct" language that now seems to us to be its normal form but whose initial, prosaic obviousness is in fact deceptive. When Pascal writes, in a fragment from the *Pensées* with which Foucault opens the "Preface" to *Histoire de la folie*, that "men are so necessarily mad that not to be mad would only be another turn [*tour*: twist, trick] of madness," he wants to underscore—through the use of a gripping turn of phrase—that the turns of madness can't be escaped: there is no escape from the soul's twisting itself, a twisting that ravages it from within and constitutes the unsurpassable form on whose model its order (or what it believes is its order) is built.⁴ This is why, in the subject, as in poetry, everything is irreparably tangled [*entortillé*: twisted, wound, coiled].

Following the grim logic of subjection, the subject is therefore nothing other than this inward turn of a mixed-up and ground-down being [*brouillé et broyé*] who, at the same time looks within and without, and moves simultaneously in front of and

4. [This fragment, numbered 414 in Brunschvig's edition, appears only in the preface to the first edition of *Folie et déraison: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1961). A new preface was written for the 1972 edition of the text. The heavily abridged English translation, published in 1965, is based on the first edition. See *Madness and Civilization*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Random House, 1965), p. ix. Howard's translation of the fragment from Pascal differs slightly from mine—tr.]

behind itself. Why is it so important to see it like this? Because this cures us definitively of the illusion of the subject-substance, fixed in its ways, sure of its limits and its rights, owner and master of itself. What we call subject, and which is in reality the result of a process of subjection, is nothing other than a conflictual relation to self, which draws its content from this capacity to turn back, by which it is led to make its own the law which is imposed on it from without. And the conscience the subject takes on, a conscience sometimes betrayed in the physical movement of turning back, is the manifestation of a crucifying tension that turns the subject into the *héautontimorouménos*—the self-torturer—that is the subject of Baudelaire's poem.

This is, for example, what is nauseatingly revealed to Roquentin when he senses something irremediably separating him from himself: "Existence takes my thoughts from behind . . . I'm taken *from behind*, I'm forced from behind to think and therefore to be something."⁵ To exist is, in reality, to be existed, to find oneself definitively incapable of existing oneself, fully and faultlessly. Sartre is never so far from being Cartesian (he will later become all the more so) as when, within the frame of a fictional narration, he evokes the murky reality of a "stuck" or "bogged down [*englué*]" cogito that exposes—one is almost tempted to write "ex-poses"—the affirmation "I am, I exist" as not having the originary character it claims it does, as depending instead on an obscure push from behind, exercised by an unknown power toward which it is impossible to turn back. Sartre's novel is traversed throughout by this phantasm of turning around: though Roquentin, in his straying across Bouville, never stops performing this movement, trying to surprise what is on the lookout for him and threatens him from behind, he never manages to overtake it. Once having turned around, there is always still something behind that cannot be mastered, something bearing witness to the impossibility of absolutely coinciding with self.

This is why the subject closed in this circle of turning back, before being "self," is "of self" [*de soi*]⁶—both relation to self and to the other which is within and outside it, relation tendentially perverted or diverted, caught in the alternative of inversion and conversion, and which, between activity and passivity, assumes contradictory forms of proximity and distance, inextricably associating innocence and compromise. Spinoza already explained, in this sense, how the "power of the affects" (*affectuum vires*), even though they originate in the power to live of the being they affect, a power from which they draw their energy, nevertheless turn on this being and, commanded by the imagination and its inadequate figures, its tropes, contribute to its subjection.⁶

The subject, who is above all "of self" in the sense of turning back, can be led to cry out, "I am! I exist!" and to be amazed by it. But contrary to what it believes, the self is not something, or as Descartes says, "some thing which thinks." The fixed posture of the tropic or oxymoronic subject is a twisting on itself that is the secret both of its living well and living badly; this subject is, like a true Roquentin, an

5. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausee* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938), p. 136. [In English: *Nausea*, trans. Lloyd Alexander (New York: New Directions, 1964), p. 102. Translation modified—tr.]

6. [The expression "*affectuum vires*" appears in the Scholium to proposition 56 of part 3 of the *Ethics*—tr.]

entirely fictional being, a pure and simple figure of style which, with the help of the magical formula "I am! I exist!," performatively affirms itself *as* subject, while at the same time installing itself in the withdrawal the "as" here signifies—a withdrawal that both separates it from itself and pairs it with the consciousness that it can have of what it "is." The subject that draws its substance from itself is therefore in reality a being without substance, a purely grammatical subject, an inflexion of the voice or a line on paper, an erasure coinciding with its inscription, making it disappear in the very movement of its appearing. It is clear that, in a moral sense, such a subject, born (or rather, produced) perverted and constitutively skewed, is doomed to be at fault.

*

These considerations of the turns and detours of the process of subjection carried out by the psychic life of power lead Butler to affirmations like the following one, which formulates the constitutive trope of the subjected subject in a concentrated way: "The desire to live is not the desire of the ego, but a desire that undoes the ego in the course of its emergence" (193-4). This formula also provides access to the other theme that traverses the entire work, a theme whose most abstract figure is "negativity," in the sense of the work of the negative. It becomes clear then why Butler's first reference must be taken from Hegel, albeit a Hegel reworked in light of Freud, and through this very reworking rendered quite different from the Hegel we think we know so well.

The tropic subject, which exhibits itself as decomposing itself, as exposing itself to a ruin programmed from within and in advance, is a subject marked by the powers of the negative: if the subject loses itself, it is above all because it has lost something it fundamentally lacks. This no doubt constitutes the basic idea of psychoanalysis, and is found as much in Freud as it is in Lacan. I am what I do not have: such would be the mental form of the dialectical confrontation between being and having which structures the subject, making it—much to its displeasure—something incomplete and undone and, more generally speaking, a finite being. This observation, however, is only the point of departure for a reflection which must be pursued even further, by posing the question of knowing how this being—which is what it does not have, or takes part in what it is not—is incapable of "making itself be [*s'être*]," so to speak, that is, comes to find itself intimately affected and contested, and even antagonized, by the constitutive accident it undergoes without really being responsible for it: an accident it nevertheless feels to be a personal error of its nature, all of whose consequences it must assume in its own name as its veritable destiny as subject. In this case, as we are going to see, the simple negation of lack and absence, which is the negation of some thing, is transformed into absolute negation, negation turned back on itself to become negation of self, or even what Hegel calls negation of negation—not in the sense of a negation applied from without as a second negation to a first, but a negation that negation applies to itself in going back on its own negativity and playing it up [*surjouant*] through the movement of the *Aufhebung*, which is the key to the Hegelian dialectic.

How can Freud clarify this idea of a negation that becomes absolute by turning back on itself, and which in the final instance constitutes the secret of the whole of psychic life? He does so by showing how the tropic subject—which, as we have seen, is only the fiction of itself, and only needs to assimilate itself more or less easily and skillfully to the generic role it is supposed to play—is also necessarily a melancholic subject. Although the famous Problem XXX, long attributed to Aristotle though perhaps composed by Theophrastus,⁷ makes melancholia the fate proper to exceptional men and to geniuses, it is in reality the hidden part of every subject's psychic life: subjects situated, as a result, beneath the inexorable sign of a black Saturn.

But what does melancholia have to do with the negation of negation? In order to explain this, chapter 5 of Butler's book offers a commentary on Freud's 1917 study of "Mourning and Melancholia." Freud returned to this text in 1923 in a passage from *The Ego and the Id* that both introduces the concept of the ego-ideal and establishes the new topic and its distribution of the agencies "id," "ego," and "superego," before developing considerations on the subject of the death drive.

We can say that mourning, in the "first" degree, is the experience of lack: something is gone forever, and it is necessary, as one says, to live with it—that is, to accommodate this absence or, rather, to accommodate oneself to it. This cannot be the result of an instantaneous decision heroically taken by the will, but requires work, a work of mourning consisting in the assimilation and acceptance of the fact that something is definitively lost and denied. We know how difficult it is to mourn something, especially if this something is someone, the object of a passionate attachment that must be ended by cutting oneself off from the object in some way. It could be argued that the analytic cure is in its own way a work of mourning—that is, an effort undertaken in view of adapting oneself to something fundamentally lacking, which in reality is to adapt oneself to its absence, to the fact that it is lacking.

The experience of melancholia is grafted onto the experience of mourning insofar as it is initially based on the fact that something has been lost, which is felt against the backdrop of a morose rumination that expresses not only the inevitably painful breaking of an attachment but the ravages produced by the emergence of a self-destructive tendency as well, the ravages of a sadness turned back on oneself. How is the passage from mourning to melancholia carried out? Through the ego's introjection of the object that is cut off, or, in reality, the introjection of the object's *loss*: the object is thus fictively recuperated in the form of its absence. But this introjection in turn makes the work of mourning interminable, and turns melancholia into an indefinitely continued and repeated mourning, since it is turned back on oneself. The loss of the other turns into a loss of self: this is what leads one to say that the melancholic subject is possessed, in its innermost part, by the death instinct, an experience of negation that has been transformed into an experience of the negation of negation, or self-negation—that is, negation turned back against self, constituting the trope by virtue of which the subject exists, and exists above all as a melancholic subject.

7. Cf. the edition of the text proposed by J. Pigeaud with the title *L'homme de génie et la mélancolie* (Paris: Rivages, 1991).

Let's come back again to the difference between mourning and melancholia. Mourning turns on the experience of something lost. In melancholia, it is this loss itself that is lost or denied: what is cut off is no longer the object but its absence, experienced as an absence interior to the subject itself, who integrates it as an absence denied and not assumed as such. In order to interpret this paradoxical phenomenon, one might be tempted to have recourse to the concept of *Verneinung*, "denegation," to which Freud devoted an elliptical text in 1924 whose commentary was the occasion for an interesting confrontation between Lacan and Jean Hyppolite, who tried to furnish a Hegelian reading of it.⁸ Melancholia is, properly speaking, a mourning that is denied and by this very fact perpetuated under the form of its integration into the psychic structure of the subject, an integration which is the key to the formation of what Freud calls the "ego-ideal" and corresponds in part to the emergence of the (unhappy) consciousness of self. Butler chooses to back up her interpretation of melancholia with Lacan's concept of "foreclosure," a term which translates *Verwerfung* and only appears in passing in Freud's text. Unconcerned with orthodoxy, she uses this term freely and retranslates it into—these are her terms—the discourse of the "never-never" [*jamais-jamais*]: there is foreclosure from the moment there is recognition of the fact that the thing is lost for ever [*pour jamais*], but superimposed over this recognition is the assertion that the loss never [*jamais*] took place.⁹ She also explains in detail how such a foreclosure founds the constitution of sexual identity in its so-called normal forms.

But if melancholia, the dark part of self-consciousness, is an incomplete mourning, does this mean that the solution to the ill-being [*mal d'être*] of the subject—to what the great melancholic humorist Raymond Queneau jokingly called its "ontalgia"¹⁰—would consist in beginning once again the work of mourning in order to complete it? In chapter 5 of *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler includes a response to her commentary on Freud by an English psychoanalyst named Adam Phillips. In the response, Phillips warns against the sacralization of mourning typical of the ordinary psychoanalyst, who elevates it to the level of a universal remedy: it is in fact only a placebo. If the ultimate message of psychoanalysis amounts to the contention that we must manage to mourn what we have lost forever, this means that it is a normalizing and adaptative discourse preaching the consensual virtues of

8. Cf. *La Psychanalyse*, vol. 1, 1956, where Lacan's translation of Heidegger's text "Logos" was also published. [Jean Hyppolite's text, "Commentaire Parlé sur la *Verneinung* de Freud," is printed as an appendix to Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1966), pp. 879-87. Lacan's response, "Réponse au commentaire de Jean Hyppolite sur la 'Verneinung' de Freud," is published in the same volume, pp. 381-99. English translations of these texts are found in Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book 1, Freud's Papers on Technique*, 1953-1954, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. John Forrester (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988)—tr.]

9. [See *The Psychic Life of Power*, p. 23: "The formula 'I have never loved' someone of similar gender and 'I have never lost' any such person predicates the 'I' on the 'never-never' of that love and loss"—tr.]

10. [In Raymond's Queneau's novel *Loin de Rueil* (Paris: Gallimard, 1944), Louis-Philippe des Cigales ("Loufifi") is diagnosed with "an ontalgia [*une ontalgie*]," characterized as "an existential sickness . . . that resembles asthma, only more distinguished" (15, my translation)—tr.]

renunciation and confession: the very thing priests have always advised, quite successfully, with no need for recourse to psychoanalytic theory.

Butler agrees with this objection, which finally leads her to suggest that the only foreseeable way out of melancholia is not religious, but political. In fact, it should not be forgotten that psychic life, with its impossible turns and detours, is the psychic life of power, power that has a part in the unfurling of the "dark thoughts" that are the inevitable correlate of the procedures of subjection. At the very end of her book, she writes: "The 'critical agency' of the melancholic is at once a social and psychic instrument. This super-egoic conscience is not simply analogous to the state's military power over its citizenry; the state cultivates melancholia among its citizenry precisely as a way of dissimulating and displacing its own ideal authority" (190-1). In other words, the State would not be so strong if its subjects were not so melancholic; they are so subservient because they are turned inward on themselves and on a loss whose necessity is inscribed in the deepest part of themselves and seems to them to be an inevitability. Subjects aren't liberated from power, as the naive anarchist vision would have one believe: subjects must first be liberated from themselves. They must be liberated from the attachment they experience to what, in them, is lost and represents, from their point of view, the absent presence of power. At the same time, there is also the chance to liberate power, to loosen—if not totally unknot—the tie attaching it to its subjected subjects: subjects whom it has difficulty doing without, and whom it needs in order to exercise over them its authority. But if it cared less about its subjects and of what they think in the deepest part of themselves, it might be able to devote itself to other tasks—for example, to an indisputably public interest. For power is never more foreign to us than when it has found the means to coil up in the most intimate part of ourselves and our private being, so as to take advantage of us all the more. The adversary to be fearlessly confronted is therefore not power, but rather the fear of power both inside and out, the fear of power in both senses: the fear we have of the power buried within us, and the fear it has of us, a fear whose painful consequences we never cease suffering. Let's liberate power from the fear that haunts it and which compels it to oppress us—namely, its fear we want to liberate ourselves from it. Let's liberate ourselves from the fear that haunts us, which is in fact the fear that we have of ourselves: then, we will give ourselves the means to maintain a little looser relation to power, modifying by degrees the conditions in which the psychic life of power functions. The most difficult thing is to begin.