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### Subjectivation: The Two-headed Symptom

#### 1. Introduction: Denial of subjectivation

It was years before the red wall of West Bengal would fall that I was waiting for the girl who would become my wife, ex-wife, and one of my best friends for life. I was standing in front of my college in the middle of so called College Street or the book alley. It was November, no chill in the air though, as is the general custom of Calcutta (not Kolkata). I had just come out of a meeting of the student political organization I owed allegiance to. We had discussed mainly the immediate, how many new recruits, what the obvious scumbags from our rival organization was doing – their underhanded technique of luring away boys with fashionable girls we secretly wished were with us. However, standing there in the middle of the commerce of ink and paper, I remembered something as a fleeting memory. On the roof of our canteen, during the twilight hours, while smoking contraband, a brilliant physics student had confessed to me that his aim in life was to be a full-timer for the communist party in the state. Weren't we from a post-ideological state? After all globalization and fall of Berlin wall were a decade old for us. Woodstock was just a video. Che Guevara was a cool face on the T-shirts. Revolution was the word we shouted with vague unease or complete certainty of non-believers. We all were struggling to polish our excuses for conforming through all our struggles, so that we can laugh and shake our heads later at our own youth.

What was ideological in our stance was not the overt complicity with the systems of thought. However, it was ideological stance that allowed us to gloss over the truly revolutionary moment in all of our lives – when we finally are able to confess even to ourselves what is truly absurd and thus truly revolutionary in its domain of illogical. Our subjectivation denies our subjectivation itself.

#### 2. The “virtual” point of the subject

We would, perhaps, have been Foucauldian –skeptical of the totalizing absolute morals and answers, searching for the resistance in the specifics and in the limits of our politics. It is, perhaps, to be Foucauldian, I looked at reality with a critical microscope aimed at the specificities. However, here I would like to speak of the Foucault that could have been, but never was. Both the Foucaults –would have been and also one that never was –are represented in Italo Calvino's story, *The Man Who Shouted Teresa*. It was the man who kept shouting the name of Teresa in spite of the whole exercise of shouting for Teresa being a sham (Raymond Roussel was the inspiration of both Foucault and Calvino). The Foucault that could have been appears briefly in his *History of Sexuality Vol. III* trying to find the source of resistance from his own discourse imperialism. Why could he not find the resistance that he was looking for? What was the truth to Foucault's Real? Let us remember that Foucault's *The order of things* begins with the painting of a painter painting a painting to explain subjectivity; a subjectivity which is already an imitation of an imitation – isn't painting itself an act of imitation? It is this notion of subjectivity that truly

captures the production of objective scientific knowledge (for human sciences and beyond). Even the earliest photographs are touched up even before the invention of Photoshop. Isn't the display of artifacts, in the recordings of a museum, already touched up in the sense that they were taken from their original contexts and sources to be placed in a timeline that fits our scientific knowledge<sup>1</sup>? It is well known that even pictures from the Hubble space telescope are paintings from numbers.

However, all these specificities of reality cannot be analyzed until we understand the symptom. If the evidences for the real are somehow touched up for the sake of a future vantage point, then our reality itself is constructed around a virtual point of reflection. However, as Zizek says in his book, *For They Know not What They Do*:

... the subject designates the virtual point in which reflection itself is reflected back into "reality" - in which for example, (my perception of) the possible future outcome of my present acts determines what I will do now. What we call "subjectivity" is at its most elementary this self-referential "short circuit" which ultimately invalidates every prognosis in intersubjective relations: the prognosis itself, as soon as it is uttered, bears upon the predicted outcome, and it is never able to take into account this effect of its own act of enunciation.

Thus, Foucault himself missed this network of virtual points that define the real and its image. It is not that the individual subject is constituted and is constitutive of the network of power. But it is the minimum necessary virtual points that serve as the support of our intersubjective relation which produces the power relation through its own prognosis. However, isn't there a possibility of a prognosis with no action possible? Isn't there a possibility of a prognosis with no future possible? What happens to our subjectivity when we mirror it back from the perfect abyss? Probably, this is the virtual point of Nietzsche –to be nothing is to have no future (to be) to reflect your past back to your present. And what if this possibility of no possibility is omnipresent? Only then we can understand the two-headed nature of subjectivation<sup>2</sup>.

### 3. Mann and Kafka

The dance had happened many times before. But, for a reason I could not fathom, my thoughts drifted to it that day. The maidens danced again, the musicians played their instruments once more, as 'Shad Suk Mynsiem'<sup>3</sup> became a poem through the emptying of my memory. I did not know then, as I do now, about how much of the poem's narrative I was subject to –from the description of the dance in the opening lines to the invocation of my mother, and so forth. It was not the uniqueness of the events in themselves that caused me to write. But rather, that I chose, even allowed, them to speak on my behalf.

<sup>1</sup> Anthropologists like Luschan understood the importance of colonial expansion for the sake of getting authentic artifacts. See *Scientific Seeing: Commodities, Curiosities, and Anthropological Objects* by Andrew Zimmerman in *Visual Sense* edited by Elizabeth Edwards and Kaushik Bhaumik.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'subjectivation' has been discussed in more detail in the article *Subaltern's image and the real: an inquiry* submitted to Social Text on Apr, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> <http://kanvasbox.com/2012/03/03/shad-suk-mynsiem-by-jobeth-ann-warjri/>

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The subject position that I took through the writing and reading of my poem is one that I would scarce give away. It offers, I think, the key to understanding why we choose certain moments in our lives to illuminate who we think we are, and why these moments reveal to us what we could become. This subjectivation process holds true even for our reading of art –paintings, literature, and music –where we make the artwork stand and speak on our behalf. Be it Catherine confessing her love for Heathcliff, or Mersault shouting out his truth to a chaplain, what is it in a work of art that causes us to cling to certain memories of it and not others? What is it that grips the pivot of our desire so strongly that, without it, our lives seem meaningless?

Aschenbach, of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* faces this situation upon meeting Tadzio. On Tadzio, Aschenbach transfers elements of his desire –the perfection of art encased in the body of youth. In effect, he makes the boy stand as a symbolic reflection of himself –Aschenbach as youth. But like the fictional characters of a novel, or a painting come to life, or even a dream, it is a self that cannot be realized. It is a form emerging out of the very narrative that stands in the way of Aschenbach's desire, as also the one that makes it possible.

Throughout the novel we see an Aschenbach whose place in life is framed by a narrative that prevents him from becoming one with his desire. Only once, in the beginning of the novel, we have a moment where there is the possibility of our hero transcending the limits of the narrative; where the encounter he has with the traveling stranger causes him to 'awaken' in a moment of self revelation. However, what follows the traumatic event is no more than Aschenbach affirming the necessity of the narrative that provides the support for his life. It is where even his displacement is one of the search for his place within that narrative. Aschenbach, in effect, does not surrender to the unreason behind the reason that provides meaning for his life. He relinquishes his will to act –one that will allow him to be one with his desire. This causes a distance between him and Tadzio so that the latter remains no more than a fetishized object, always out of reach. The artist is one with his craft in so far as the artwork necessitates a narrative to stand in the way of desire. In as much as the narrative provides the basis for how the subject thinks and acts, desire is transferred onto something outside of ourselves (object) so that the latter reflects upon the symptomatic of our reality buttressed by a symbolic network.

The symbolic network is the narrative that provides meaning to our lives, the reason behind our struggle to become and our coming to being. And yet, this same narrative comes to us in many names. Its manifest content is seen in the fanaticism of religion, the devotion to art, the pursuit of science, and so on. Should its manifest reason crumble, we come face to face with the void –a void that is not unlike the one faced by Josef K. of Franz Kafka's *The Trial*.

The same narrative that pervades *Death in Venice* is also to be found in *The Trial*. However, where in the former, the manifest content of the narrative (the day-dream, as it were) appears reasonable to the subject, in the latter, it foreshadows unreason. In a certain sense, Josef K. steps into the unreason behind the symbolic narrative which Aschenbach chose not to do. Kafka's *The Trial* is a story of our negation of the symbolic order, of where the symbolic order fails to provide the support of meaning for our lives. Should it happen, we, like Josef K., would search for the affirmation of our existence in the continual utterance of our names, our designations which, in themselves, are but hollow representations of who we are. But the story is also of resistance in spite of our effacement.

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Josef K's trial exemplifies that moment of trauma where the symbolic order can no longer speak on our behalf. Throughout the course of the novel, we find Kafka's protagonist seeking to represent his cause to no avail. The same symbolic network that causes many of its subjects to live as if in limbo renders him silent. Each time Josef K. speaks, he is silenced by the proceedings of the court who holds the power of acquittal; and yet, more likely, condemnation. It is in this silence that we find the kernel of our existence. Forever waiting at the door of the law, we search for signs that will acknowledge our struggle, our entry into the world where the makings of our utopias are realized. This struggle, however, entails that we forsake the pleasure we derive from a mere infringement of its laws (as Aschenbach does in his pursuit of Tadzio). It requires us to turn the symbolic reflection back on itself in the realization of what it truly is – a fantasy masking our real. And when the masks are torn down, to find the place where the Real voices itself in silence – beyond rhetoric, beyond what can be articulated – it has no cause to speak. It is here where we become free of the shackles that bind us to desire; where we realize both the limits and the possibilities of our subjectivation. When Josef K. dies, he is denied the pleasure of want. He is denied the right to go on living. And yet, his death could not speak to us more strongly. For it is there that the authority of the narrative turns on its head; where the subject makes the narrative responsible for his silencing. Thus, it is here where we also find the resistance to the symbolic narrative – the unmasking of our Real as the revelation of our revolutionary potential.

While one cannot escape subjectivation, the same also provides for an existence beyond its framework. As long as man is a thinking being, the symbolic network will exert its influence, just as much as the unreason within reason will allow us to question it. Ironically enough, this same process gives us the truth behind our strivings – that while we all want to die like Aschenbach, 'our heroes die in squalor'<sup>4</sup>.

#### 4. The yellow demon

The Polish woman traveling with Maxim Gorky asked her companion regarding the identity of a woman put up as the Statue of Liberty. As Gorky remembered in *The City of the Yellow Devil*, the woman's companion had replied: 'The American God.' The American God stood upon Her pedestal covered in verdigris with a torch that has lost its light to the smoke coming out of the belly of the yellow devil. Gorky's examination of the city of New York resembles Goethe's proclamation on materialism: 'Grey...like death...without the light and the sun'. But the devil is alive here and the humanity, its food. Gorky imagined the reproach of the statues all around the city that would be spoken to the living – to the living intestinal, digestible that humanity has been reduced to.

This was, indeed, not his first impression. On his first arrival to New York, on what would be a failure of a trip, he was thoroughly impressed. He spoke, rather, of 'a fantasy constructed by crazy giants, monsters longing after beauty, stormy souls full of wild energy.' However, the sketch of the yellow devil was also completed during his stay in Upstate New York. The alienation from his American fellow-literati (including Mark Twain), perhaps made him paint the monstrous picture of New York City.

However, Gorky's devil is already decontextualized. The same devil gives the fantasy of beauty and energy its shape – all the while chewing up the immigrant population coming to the shores of New York

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.scribesnook.com/2010/01/my-ramblings-on-a-hungry-stomach/chapter/3/>

City in the early twentieth century. The process of digestion/inclusion into the monstrous was already complete about three decades later when Adorno and Horkheimer visited the United States. American labour was already in an ambiguous position by then. Thus, for Adorno, labour did not hold any revolutionary potential. What is this monster, the devil, that we speak of? Gorky's devil was yellow, akin to gold.

What Gorky's revelation showed was the fundamental proleterization process that befell him as well as the dirty, soot-ridden immigrants. And it is also true that Gorky did not recognize his own proleterization - the victim's voice lies in the negation of present articulation. And if we are to regain our voice, we must never play the victim. We must not reduce ourselves in the deathly equilibrium between the symbolic and the substance. If we are to speak of the victims, we must not let their proleterization be a function of our inquiry. The monster is not gold. The monster is not materialism. The monster lies in the inquiry which makes even our most radical champions reduce our existence to a process without subject.

### 1. The Real of subjectivation

Behind the drive is the want; behind the want is the inquiry: 'What do you want?' or, rather, the object of desire. The twin foils of Aschenbach and Josef K. somehow reproduce the dynamics of desire. In Aschenbach's desire for Tadzio was the denial of subjectivation -reconciliation with the symbolic, enriched in the question: 'Does he desire me?' In K., in his want of reconciliation with the symbolic, he reproduces the core of Freud's *thanatos*: 'Can (the symbolic) stand to lose me?' It is as if the fantasy of Aschenbach's earlier life serves as a fantasy to the Real of his desire. It is the fantasy of the torch that is forever out, which serves as the support of the real of Gorky's Polish immigrants. However, fantasy also needs the meaning, the symbolic. However, in K., there is no support. In his *Sociological Imagination*, C. Wright Mills described how we feel as if we're caught in the currents of history, unable to understand the currents of history, unable to understand the meanings of our actions. And apparently, it fills us with the vague unease at the thought of history. But it is the Kafkaesque universe where the fantasy stops being the support for our Real. This is where we arrive at the Real unmitigated by fantasy. Where our only option is like K. -to be true to our death drives -to make our unreason as the reflection point while in silence; so that when we speak, we will do so through the unmitigated categories of our own revolutionary moment.

