The Narcissism That Is Not One:
On Judith Butler’s *The Psychic Life of Power*

Adam Rosen

When Judith Butler asks in *The Psychic Life of Power*, “why does subject formation appear to take place only upon the acceptance of guilt, so that there is no ‘I’ who might ascribe a place to itself, who might be announced in speech, without first a self-attribution of guilt, a submission to the law through an acceptance of its demand for conformity,” it seems as though she is yet again asking after the incipient emergence of the subject as such (1997:107; emphasis added). Paraphrasing this question, we might ask: why must guilt-ridden submission to law precede and condition the emergence of a subject? Upon raising the question of subject formation in this way, Butler’s hope is that we will start to ask: whence this guilt and whence this attachment to law as a reaction to and staving off of guilt? (or, in a certain psychoanalytic register: why is a certain form of splitting coincident with the emergence of the subject?) Could it be that embracing the law is a reaction-formation, and thus, in conditions in which the aforementioned guilt never has a chance to come onto the scene -- that is, in conditions in which a certain primordial foreclosure is itself foreclosed -- the motivating impulsion toward law would be thoroughly or at least partially eradicated? Could this be the beginning of a radical critique of law as such, one in which the critical subject would risk a symbolic death (that is, a de-subjectivization) in order to bring about transformations in the structuration of our socio-psychic realities whose implications would be, strictly speaking, unfathomable from within our symbolic status quo? If so, we may seriously wonder why Zizek would ever accuse Butler of reformism, as in the following excerpt from *The Ticklish Subject*:

One should criticize Butler for conflating this act [the act of subversion] in its radical dimension with the performative reconfiguration of one’s symbolic condition via its repetitive displacements: the two are not the same -- that is to say, one should maintain a crucial distinction between a mere
‘performative reconfiguration’, a subversive displacement which remains within the hegemonic field and, as it were, conducts an internal guerilla war of turning the terms of the hegemonic field against itself, and the much more radical act of a thorough reconfiguration of the entire field which redefines the very conditions of socially sustained performativity. It is thus Butler herself who ends up in a position of allowing precisely for marginal ‘reconfigurations’ of the predominant discourse – who remains constrained to a position of ‘inherent transgression’, which needs as a point of reference the Other in the guise of a predominant discourse that can be only marginally displaced or transgressed. (2000: 264)

On the other hand, Zizek may be onto something insofar as Butler, toward the end of her chapter on Althusser, further specifies the aim of such a “critical desubjectification” or symbolic death as: “to expose the law as less powerful than it seems” (1997:130). Is Butler so thoroughly committed to reformism that she would circumscribe the range of our possibilities for resistance such that all we are left with are those acts that reveal the law as less than absolutely powerful? If “there is a possibility of being elsewhere or otherwise,” but only insofar as we refrain from “denying our complicity in the law that we oppose,” is it then the case that resistance amounts to no more than foregrounding that the power of law is a pale imitation of divine power? (1997:130)

Turning to other moments in Butler’s corpus, we could respond: surely not! However, the character of such a response is, however well formulated, still somewhat problematic. What I would like to venture, briefly, through the course of this paper, is a reading of Butler’s chapter on Althusser wherein it is precisely the temptation to become embroiled in these kinds of questions that we must resist. In other words, it may be that it is precisely the exquisitely engaging character of the aforementioned debates that lures us into glossing over a troubling moment that Butler’s text seems to turn around, but only to elude and cover over, time and again: namely, the status of primary narcissism. To lay my cards on the table, I don’t think that this chapter on Althusser does much work for Butler. Although Butler claims that “the present chapter attempts to reread that essay [“Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatus”] to understand how interpellation is essentially figured through the religious example,” other than allowing her to argue...
that subjection is never fixed and final, which she 1) cogently argues elsewhere and 2) says on the first page of the chapter is a well known criticism of Althusser that she need not rehearse, it seems as though Butler’s has little use for a turn to Althusser (1997:113). Moreover, I take it that the point of the chapter can’t be just that we should distinguish between theological omnipotence and the temporal power of law – I would hope that we don’t need Butler to tell us that! – which seems to be the brunt of her criticism of Althusser. So what is she doing? And why does she spend so much time accusing Dolar of a theological impulse that converts the Lacanian Real into a mystical interiority? Part of my argument is that the trick of the chapter is to get us thinking, in the wake of her criticism of Dolar, that the Lacanian Real is ultimately the introjected “object” of same-sex desire that is foreclosed by certain social restrictions and that the stability of the division between the psychic and the social is not as strict as it may seem. Rather, we must, at least temporarily, put aside these questions and attempt to read this chapter symptomatically, as a sustained refusal to confront primary narcissism, that is, as a meandering journey through critical theory that, through its intrigues, focuses our attention far away from the vexing problem of primary narcissism. To re-cite Butler’s citation of “Jean-Marie Vincent[’s] remarks[,] . . . a text is not interesting only because it is organized logically, because of the apparently rigorous way in which it develops its arguments, but also because of what disorganizes its order, because of all that weakens it (1997:113-114).

Presumably, Butler turns toward Althusser’s scene of interpellation in order to provide a point of contrast for her own account of subject formation. When she claims that this scene -- even in its allegorical foregrounding of the non-narrativizability of the events for which it seeks to account -- simply assumes that the subject-to-be turns toward the law without inquiring into the motivation for such turning, it seems that Butler wants, over and against the Althusserian scene of interpellation, to generate an account that explains rather than presupposes such a motivation. In Butler’s account, a self-preservative drive and diffuse sense of pleasure (i.e., an infant) turns toward the law out of a passionate attachment which, in allowing itself to be exploited by the law,
works off a sense of guilt that *precedes* such a turning. Again, rather than starting with the turn toward the law, as Althusser does, Butler wants to ask “why does subject formation appear to take place only upon the acceptance of guilt, so that there is no ‘I’ who might ascribe a place to itself, who might be announced in speech, without first a self-attribution of guilt, a submission to the law through an acceptance of its demand for conformity?” (1997:107; emphases added) In order to ask after this passionate attachment to the law, Butler wants to ask: why would we turn toward the law if doing so amounts to our own subordination? Why do we feel the need to work off a sense of guilt through the work self-subordination to the law? Why, given that “subordination . . . [is] the price of subjectivization,” do we seem eminently willing, in fact, always already willing, to pay this price? (1997:113) Why it is that “yielding to the law might then be read as the compelled consequence of a *narcissistic* attachment to one’s continuing existence?” (1997: 112-113; emphases added)

As fruitful as exploring these questions may be, my suggestion is that we first ask Butler the following: is this narcissistic attachment to one’s continuing existence not evidence that narcissism is thought here as a secondary narcissism, one which presupposes a subject/object distinction? In order for it to be a compelling drive, and thus a drive that would initiate the subject-to-be’s turning toward the law and acceptance of subordination as the price of its continued existence, mustn’t we think the drive for self-preservation as itself presupposing a threat to (it’s) existence that it seeks to evade? If this threat to the infant’s existence has something to do with the guilt that impels it into the embrace of the law, insofar as guilt presupposes the suffusion of bodily contours with a socially regulative discourse (see Butler’s “The Lesbian Phallus and the Morphological Imaginary” in *Bodies That Matter*), is not the subject-to-be turning toward the law already structured by law, already a grammatical “I” of sorts within the regulative discourse that says “you can not take pleasure in *this* without guilt/fear”? Note that it is not that *there* cannot be pleasure in *this*, but that *you* cannot take pleasure in this without risk. Consequently, does the drive for self-preservation not presuppose a delineation of a specific formation of existence that it seeks to preserve? If there is a threat of in-existence, there must be
something threatening – but if there is something threatening, there is an other, and existence as such is not threatened precisely insofar as the threatening other is what would persist in the scene of one’s annihilation. Rather than anxiety, we have fear, and thus we find ourselves within secondary narcissism.¹ It is not that the desire to be responds to a threat to existence as such (such may be the case in primary narcissism); rather, such a desire comes onto the scene when one’s existence is threatened by something. Does not the desire to be arise, then, as a motivating condition of subjection precisely when the infant is threatened by the possibility of not being, that is, when the infant acquires a sense of a world and the ability to imagine the world without itself in it (or a world in which the infant remains, but as somehow injured, debilitated, castrated, etc?), that is, when there is already a transition from primary to secondary narcissism? Moreover, if the ego is a projected bodily surface, if pain is a condition of the emergence of body parts to consciousness (again, see “The Lesbian Phallus”), and if guilt generates pain, then doesn’t the guilt-ridden turn toward the law already testify to the formation of an ego, and thus situate us within secondary narcissism?

Ultimately, it seems as if Butler wants to account for subject formation exclusively in terms appropriate to secondary narcissism. Hence, examples of acquiring skills in the workplace or engaging in religious rituals become analogies for subject formation, such as when Butler claims that “submission and mastery take place simultaneously, and this paradoxical simultaneity constitutes the ambivalence of subjection” (1997:116) or that “there is guilt, and then a repetitive practice by which skills are acquired, and then and only then an assumption of the grammatical place within the social as a subject” (1997:119; emphases added). Since, to become a subject “is to have become an emblem of lawfulness, a citizen in good standing, but one for whom that status is tenuous, indeed, one who has known – somehow, somewhere – what it is not to have that standing and

¹ Or, perhaps we find ourselves within a certain Kleinian interpretation of infantile life. However, since, insofar as I am aware, the relation between Butler and Klein has not even begun to be worked out, this possibility will have to remain in suspension for awhile.
hence to have been cast out as guilty,” it seems as if the drive for 
self-preservation that accounts for the turning toward law is 
phenomenologically coincident with a wound to secondary 
narcissism (1997:118). But isn’t the transition from primary to 
secondary narcissism where we would expect to locate an account 
of subject formation?

Why would Butler continually forego thinking though 
primary narcissism or the transition from primary to secondary 
narcissism in terms of its contribution to subject formation? 
Perhaps Butler is averse to thinking about primary narcissism 
because when she claims that a disavowal of same-sex desire is 
phenomenologically coincident with the guilt that impels the 
subject-to-be’s passionate attachment to the law and thus to subject 
formation, it ends up that because subject formation occurs only 
later when the subject-to-be -- i.e., the infant -- is compelled by a 
secondary narcissism to engage in certain subject-constituting 
routines, the repudiation of same-sex desire, and thus the recognition 
of sexual difference, must precede the transition from primary to 
secondary narcissism. So it seems Butler is locked in an invidious 
either/or: either sexual difference emerges as recognizable (and 
thus subject to repudiation) before the subject becomes apparent to 
itself, before there is any subject/object split, before the operations 
of the Symbolic take hold, before there is a Primordial Mother, 
which is to say, originarily or 2) there is always already a subject 
and primary narcissism is thoroughly reducible to secondary 
narcissism.

If a disavowal of same-sex desire emerges simultaneously 
with a guilt-ridden relation to a same-sex object (the “object” 
emerging as object precisely when it is lost), and the loss of this 
object generates a primordial introjection that begins the process of 
ego formation, it seems as if the guilt that is supposed to impel the 
subject-to-be’s passionate attachment to the law and thus to subject 
formation ends up generating an ego, an other, and a symbolically 
elaborated relation between them before the subject-to-be turns

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2 At least within the bounds of Freudian and Lacanian theory. Again, perhaps a 
turn to Melanie Klein would be helpful here; although the issue is much to 
complex to even begin to work out in this paper.
toward the law. Within the bounds of Butler’s account, then, this turning toward the law may modify the symbolic constitution of the subject, but it seems that there is already a subject of sorts; or, it seems that there is always already sexual difference.

References
