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Pleasure in Failure: The Guilty Subject in Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Austin

Jing Tsu

THE QUESTION OF THE DESIRE TO “BE” has given concern to a number of important texts on subjectivity. Subjectification can be the lure of a cultural image, the violence of domination, or the seduction of pleasure. From Freud to Althusser, that question has continually problematized rather than concluded their inquiries. One is struck, for example, in the chapter on conscience in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, by the strange pleasure the ego secures for itself over and against its repetitions of self-enacted punishment. Somehow, the very corrective and prohibitive mechanism of the superego becomes coveted as the possibility of repeated transgressions. In Althusser’s scene of interpellation, the subject again survives subjectification in misrecognizing itself in the hailing. The desire of the subject, it appears, is always held elsewhere. The task of this paper, however, is not to follow a psychoanalytical trajectory. Rather, I wish to give thought to a different possibility in considering the question of subjectification. My question has to do with what keeps the subject in thrall—arrested, seduced, and interested—in the moment of its subjectification. My choice of texts—Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Austin—is oriented towards a reading of conscience as promise, of Being as a contractual possibility, and of the necessity of human bondage to guilt and failure.

Bad Conscience

In *The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche speaks of the conscience as humans’ “weakest, most fallible organ” (217). “Bad conscience,” Nietzsche continues, is that “deep-seated malady to which man succumbed under the pressure of the most profound transformation he ever underwent—the one that made him *once and for all* a social and pacific creature.” Depriving one of taste and distinction, bad conscience overburdens one with demands for servile meekness. However vague one’s idea of a public good, that jus-

tification legitimates one's moral sensibilities with the illusion of virtue. Under the guise of bad conscience, humans found their altruistic ideals. Guilt enables the possibility of one's "soul" and verifies one's "interiorization." But more significantly, there is something about the institution of bad conscience that makes it irreversible, installed once and for all. It makes a decisive adjudication about how one can carry oneself—that is, with moral rectitude. It is as if once bad conscience is acquired, one can only operate in a fundamentally split consciousness of oneself—a profound sense of guilt that can only increase rather than allow for restitution. If this "profound transformation" is indeed experienced "once and for all," one would need to ask whether this subjectification is complete even though it is irreversible. In other words, what is the subject transformed into? Does the desire to be subject exceed any particular subjectification?

Persecuting himself, man is at once the "prisoner" and "inventor" of bad conscience. But this self-imprisonment is also to be understood as an indebtedness. For Nietzsche, the "burden of outstanding debt and the desire to make final restitution" (223) have transposed guilt into piety in humans' attempt to comfort themselves. What this indebtedness implies is that the "final restitution" always remains as something yet to come, still outstanding. The desire for this finality or judgment becomes, in actuality, a desire sustained by its very impossibility, its infinite deferral. Nietzsche raises the question, "could they ever be *fully* repaid? An anxious doubt remain[s] and [grows] steadily. . ." (223). It is as if there must necessarily be some guilt still outstanding, some impossible restitution toward which one can still feel a conscience, reminded again and again by an anxious doubt. Bad conscience, it appears, continually projects itself as something still outstanding. The anxiety to make this always-future payment fixes for itself an impossibility that forces one back into one's indebted existence. However, there is still and always good faith in the possibility of making oneself good again. How can we account for this ceaseless good-will, this perpetual giving-over-to? How can we articulate this possibility of redeeming or reaffirming oneself as enabled by a profound indebtedness, a negativity in one's being that itself can never be recovered? Is this promise organized around and by the very void of being? What economy is at work in "man's will to find himself guilty, and unredeemably so"? (226)

Nietzsche's answer would be a rigorous critique of the sham of virtue and guilt. How convenient, he might say, for us to invent guilt as though we were "not a goal but a way, an interlude, a bridge, a great promise" (219). Rather than taking themselves as ends, humans became the justifiers for the infinite deferment of the satisfaction to their own instincts. They

became enthralled in the divine presence they themselves concocted. For Nietzsche, this “sickness” of piety and virtue, this pretense of conscience, can only be overcome by the will to power. The “great promise” to which humans commit themselves out of fear and conscience is an enthrallment from which we must awaken ourselves. But what still remains to be thought in this promise, this enthrallment, is what entices humans’ profound indebtedness. Nietzsche’s remark on the promise, rather than sustaining the question of will, gives us over to the suspension of promise in which we stand as only “a way, an interlude, a bridge.” In other words, “man’s will to find himself guilty” is already without the possibility of restitution, a final redemption. Guilt enables us to turn toward a promise; our anxious guilt resides not in the promise desired as a final goal, an arrival, or fulfillment of certainty, but in the promise as desire, as anticipation, and as uncertainty. Guilt, then, remains to be thought as an indebtedness that extends into the always-already and the yet-to-be. Our Nietzschean text gives us this question that must be considered in another text.

Dasein and Death

Dasein is “thrownness,” understood as a projection, an ahead-of-oneselfness that marks the fundamental structure of *Dasein*—waiting. The fundamental sayings, or the sayings most painstakingly groped for, in Heidegger’s *Being and Time* linger on this possibility. It is *Dasein*’s concern that makes possible this waiting, this willingness to wait, even though we can no longer speak of a will that can make manifest what we are waiting for. *Dasein* waits for disclosure, a gift of Being—as Heidegger will later say—that is simultaneously withheld in its generosity. *Dasein* waits, but it can no longer know what it waits for; it anticipates without knowing when or what can bring an end to its anxiety. In “Division Two: *Dasein* and Temporality,” Heidegger attempts to think of Being as revealed to *Dasein* in and by Time. Once *Dasein* concedes to death—not death as represented among the “they,” but death as one’s “ownmost” possibility—*Dasein* comes into itself as fully assigned:

Death is the possibility of the absolute impossibility of *Dasein*. Thus death reveals itself as that possibility which is one’s ownmost, which is non-relational, and which is not to be outstripped. As such, death is something distinctively impending. (294; original emphasis)

Dasein's concession to death lies in its understanding of the absolute impossibility of death to be comprehended as one's own—that is, as that which can be claimed or mastered by representation. When Heidegger says "one's ownmost," he at the same time gives that "one" over to what it claims as its own. *Dasein*, thinking that it has death in its grasp, in its comprehension—because it has domesticated death in its participation in the rituals commemorating others' deaths—is at once claimed by death itself, by the death toward which *Dasein* nears and approaches in its destiny. Death does not belong to *Dasein*; *Dasein* belongs to Death as the limit of its experience. Nonetheless, we are speaking of a belonging that is "non-relational." Belonging to death is one's own belongingness as well as belonging to the other, death. "Belonging" is not taking for oneself, in the sense of proprietizing, but a mutual giving that clears the way for one another's emergence. As such, it is non-relational, because to even relate would be to deprive the other of what he/she/it has to offer, and to substitute, for the other's unique openness, one's own presence. Death is "distinctively" impending, because it cannot be substituted by any of *Dasein's* familiar concepts of death. *Dasein* cannot know death for itself. Death is that which claims *Dasein* most irrevocably. It impends upon *Dasein's* being as that which withholds *Dasein's* greatest promise from *Dasein* itself. It holds that promise out before *Dasein* as that towards which *Dasein* comports itself most anxiously yet freely.

Anxiety, says Heidegger, is the basic state-of-mind into which *Dasein* is thrown, where *Dasein* finds itself. In its anxiety, *Dasein* understands the possibility of Being and flees from it in its falling. *Dasein* understands without knowing that understanding itself can only be a gift given by Being. *Dasein* flees in anxiety; even in the mundane everydayness that tranquilizes *Dasein* with ceaseless chatter and easy comfort, it is haunted by that from which it flees. *Dasein* feels its ownmost possibility elsewhere, outside and carrying itself towards its possibility. Death is lost in chatter, only to be preserved, in its impending presence, in the meaningless chatter that continues to take it as its theme:

One says, "Death certainly comes, but not right away." With this "but. . .," the "they" denies that death is certain. "Not right away" is not a purely negative assertion, but a way in which the "they" interprets itself. With this interpretation, the "they" refers itself to that which is proximally accessible to *Dasein* and amenable to its concern. Everydayness forces its way into the urgency of concern, and divests itself of the fetters of a weary "inactive thinking about death." Death is deferred to "sometime later," and this is done by invoking the so-called "general opinion." Thus the "they" covers

up what is peculiar in death's certainty—that it is possible at any moment. Along with the certainty of death goes the *indefiniteness* of its "when." (302)

One says, "not now but later," thereby bringing death under rein by interpreting it temporally as some later occurrence safely if only temporarily distanced from oneself.¹ This attempt to fix death at a particular point in time and the anxiety with which the "they" comfort one another through incessant interpretations of death (and thus of themselves) only betray the presence of death as that which continually haunts and preoccupies *Dasein's* concern. The fact that *Dasein* has concern for death lets death, as an issue for *Dasein*, pervade *Dasein's* very being. Death, indeed, is possible at any moment, even though the "they" and the *Dasein* who is lost in the "they" conceal its distinctive impending, its certainty. Even in the attempt to cover up death as *Dasein's* ownmost possibility, the "they" cannot help but invoke, alongside their denial, the inevitability of death. The "they" suspend and defer the certainty of death only to be obsessed with its imminence, the certainty of its arrival. In the attempt to extricate themselves from death and seek tranquillity in the familiar everydayness, the "they" only come to commit, more than ever, to the possibility of death. In deferring, the "they" only temporalize themselves according to death. The question of encountering death becomes ever more foreboding in its deferral. *Dasein* understands and is constantly coming to terms with death, though it does so in a "fugitive" manner. *Dasein* escapes only to find that fleeing already within the giving and allowance of Being. *Dasein* flees from only to go towards. Death remains *Dasein's* ownmost possibility, because it cannot be precipitated, only anticipated. *Dasein's* predicament is its suffering of this anxious uncertainty. *Dasein* waits.

"Anticipation discloses to existence that its uttermost possibility lies in giving itself up, and thus it shatters all one's tenaciousness to whatever existence one has reached" (308). In being-towards-death, *Dasein* faces its ownmost possibility for Being. *Dasein* concedes to its own shattering, only to find a more ordinary mode of being—being towards that which is impossible but destined. In giving itself over to the possibility of death—the impossibility of comprehending the limit it constitutes for the being *Dasein* has known—*Dasein* risks its own shattering, its own disappearance as a coherent subject.² In this shattering, however, *Dasein* gives itself as a gift, inviting in turn the opening up of Being in its giving—freedom:

Anticipation reveals to *Dasein* its lostness in the they-self, and brings it face to face with the possibility of being itself, primarily unsupported by concerned solicitude, but of being itself, rather, in an impassioned *freedom towards death*—a freedom which has been released from the illusions of the

“they,” and which is factual, certain of itself, and anxious. (311; original emphasis)

Dasein is lost in “they,” but this lostness is never without the enabling gift of that from which “they” flee in everydayness. Anticipation particularizes *Dasein* in its own distinct potential for being. Anxiety brings *Dasein* back into its ownmost possibility, but anxiety is also that which leads one towards death. Anxiety throws *Dasein* back into itself. This already implies a split movement: *Dasein* comports itself *towards* only to be thrown back into itself. “Being-towards-death is essentially anxiety” (310). In other words, *Dasein* must consider its own promise for being as held elsewhere in order to understand its potential for it. But *Dasein* does not strategize or plan this “in order to”; *Dasein* gives itself over to the promise in order for Being to lend itself to *Dasein* in *Dasein*’s concession to death. *Dasein* projects itself and throws itself in ecstasy in an “impassioned” freedom towards death. *Dasein* embraces its own shattering, because in that passionate attachment, it embraces something elsewhere. *Dasein* is given that which is other than the death towards which it gives itself. *Dasein* gives, in and beyond itself, to Being. Being-towards-death individualizes *Dasein* from the anonymous they-self. Being-towards-death frees *Dasein*’s ownmost possibility for Being from everydayness.

Dasein and the Voice of Conscience

Dasein gives, but in this giving, it also shows that it belongs. We need to give further consideration to this giving that both claims and relinquishes. But first we need to give thought to what testifies to *Dasein*’s capacity for such a claim.

Because *Dasein* is lost in the “they,” it must first *find* itself. In order to *find* itself at all, it must be “shown” to itself in its possible authenticity. In terms of its *possibility*, *Dasein* is already a potentiality-for-Being-its-Self, but it needs to have this potentiality attested. (313)

Before *Dasein* can give itself, it needs to authenticate itself from the “they-ness.” *Dasein* needs to define and individuate its own possibility as distinctively proper to itself. For this to happen, *Dasein* must be somehow reflected to itself in its possible authenticity. *Dasein* must be “shown” to itself, attested to and validated by the “voice of conscience.” In listening, *Dasein* finds itself in a self-encounter. The voice of conscience is a calling that offers *Dasein* up to itself. Indeed, cloaked within this apparent self-calling—it is, after all, one’s own conscience speaking—is a voice utterly

strange to oneself. Before approaching this strangeness, however, we need to heed Heidegger's saying that *Dasein* "wants to have a conscience" (314). *Dasein* is already a willing, attentive addressee who listens for a message to be received. The giving is not only the gift of Being but of *Dasein* as well. It is not that a voice of conscience reaches *Dasein* abruptly but that *Dasein* has always already waited for the calling. *Dasein* gives the ear to hear as well as listens to the voice of conscience, the gift from and of the other. This readiness to hear belongs to the resoluteness of *Dasein* who, in its decision to concede to Being, is always already expecting the appeal to be made:

The appeal calls back by calling forth: it calls *Dasein* forth to the possibility of taking over, in existing, even that thrown entity which it is; it calls *Dasein* back to its thrownness so as to understand this thrownness as the null basis which it has to take up into existence. This calling-back in which conscience calls forth, gives *Dasein* to understand that *Dasein* itself—the null basis for its null projection, standing in the possibility of its Being—is to bring itself back to itself from its lostness in the "they"; and this means that it is *guilty*. (333)

Dasein is called forth only to be called back. *Dasein* finds itself in an "always-already"—that is, guilty. In other words, *Dasein* comes back into itself reflexively, with an always-already estranged familiarity. *Dasein's* response exceeds the appeal being made, in that *Dasein* finds the appeal within and coming from itself. "In conscience *Dasein* calls itself" (320). *Dasein's* conscience is that which ensures the back-into-oneself of guilt. Conscience is that which binds *Dasein* in a profound indebtedness. But "binding" does not mean an enslavement, but a non-relational rapport not to be transcended. Guilt is an indebtedness that is at once one's ownmost possibility. *Dasein* wants to have a conscience, but in wanting it, finds itself already belonging to conscience, to guilt. *Dasein* calls itself as that which comes from afar and finds an always-already resonance within itself. Following Heidegger more attentively, we find *Dasein's* call a most profound self-summoning: "the call comes from me and yet from beyond me and over me" (320). *Dasein's* desire for conscience at once exceeds that wanting. The call from *Dasein* is also that which calls from beyond. The mutual resonance finds itself in *Dasein* as well as in that which *Dasein* experiences as the uncanny. *Dasein* calls itself, but does not recognize that it does. It only finds itself in a wanting and readiness to hear. But in this wanting, *Dasein* gives to the uncanny and invites it forth into openness. Conscience is the manifestation of *Dasein's* care, and in that care *Dasein* gives to the possibility of its ownmost possibility.

Es Gibt

We have considered *Dasein's* conscience as that which calls from over and beyond *Dasein*, while given by *Dasein's* wanting. We have also given thought—though never exhaustively—to *Dasein's* guilt and indebtedness, the “always-already” in which *Dasein* finds itself as thrownness. We can no longer take for granted the generosity of givenness that has allowed the operation of this paper thus far. In his considerations for the task of thinking, Heidegger brings *givenness* to the fore: *es gibt*. The “Letter on Humanism” unfolds the mutual belongingness of *Dasein* and Being:

Said plainly, thinking is the thinking of Being. The genitive says something twofold. Thinking is of Being inasmuch as thinking, appropriated by Being, belongs to Being. At the same time thinking is of Being insofar as thinking, belonging to Being, listens to Being.(220)

Thinking is enabled by the givenness of Being to think, by the gift given for thought. But to the extent that thinking thinks, it gives in return—reciprocally—by listening and waiting for Being’s gift. “Thinking is the thinking of Being” (my emphasis), that is, of Being as given to be thought and as given in thinking. A mutual giving-way-to, clearing, allows for thinking. Giving is inextricably bound with belongingness. When “It Gives,” thinking is first called upon to think. But the gift is not surrendered unconditionally, unconcealed. In its “letting-appear,” it conceals all the more in its candor. “It Gives,” but does not give itself completely in the gift. Heidegger’s later articulation of the gift as “sending” reveals the appeal of the *promise*, the *possibility* that at once suspends its own fulfillment.

In his lecture on “Time and Being,” Heidegger remarks on thinking in relation to Being:

To think Being explicitly requires us to relinquish Being as the ground of beings in favor of the giving which prevails concealed in unconcealment, that is, *in favor of the It gives*. As the gift of this It gives, Being belongs to giving. As a gift, Being is not expelled from giving. Being, presencing, is transmuted. As allowing-to-presence, it belongs to unconcealing; as the gift of unconcealing it is retained in the giving. (6; my emphasis)

Just as one must relinquish the ground upon which to relate, analyze, and comprehend so as to receive what may freely appear, Being withholds its own revealedness as it gives in *favor* of one’s thinking. One risks the shattering of one’s certainty as a knowing subject, capable of ordering and calling to presence objects of its knowledge, so as to be still able to hear the calling of the uncanny. What Heidegger means by “explicitly” is not to think more precisely about Being, as though it were delimitable and only

lacking a more rigorous definition; rather, “explicitly” means more openly, more attentively, without the violence of wresting meaning away from its natural reticence. Even though it is impossible to stay away from metaphors, which are tainted by the complacency of the self-knowing subject, one must think more originarily, truly, closely, and interestedly about words that gather meaning without, however, taking it as their own possession.

What I wish to sustain in the above passage is the favoring of “It Gives.” What preserves Being in its possibility is that which it keeps in concealment. Thinking must learn how to be in favor of this concealment, which remains Being’s ownmost reticence, its secret. Thinking must learn to relinquish its demand to know for the desire of knowing. *Dasein’s* approach towards Being, towards the understanding of Being, must observe its reticence. The gift of Being consists in the sending, the movement of allowing-to-be-experienced. The gift is not given once and for all, nor is it given unreservedly. Being withholds and preserves itself in giving. But what is given, what is experienced as the gift is the sending that offers *Dasein* itself to its destiny. *Dasein’s* destiny consists in being sent towards that which conserves itself in its opening to *Dasein*. “As a gift, Being is not expelled from giving. Being, presencing, is transmuted.” Just because Being is not offered up to *Dasein* and completely exposed, it does not mean that the gift is only that which Being sends and is itself emptied of Being. Being is not a sender but sends *itself* in the gift. But *as* the gift—already a transposition by metaphor, by extension—Being still retains that which is its ownmost. Being’s presencing, coming-into-presence and thus yet-to-be-present, is transmuted into the gift; Being gives itself into destiny, but what gives still remains concealed and reticent. Earlier in *Being and Time*, Heidegger says that “conscience discourses solely and constantly in the mode of keeping silent” (318). As that which calls *Dasein* to its ownmost possibility, conscience is silence. But before saying that too quickly, one needs to consider the modality of keeping silent. Conscience speaks, but not in the sense of communication. Conscience discourses, engages, and entices *Dasein*, but it discourses in the mode of constant reserve, of silence. Conscience is not silence, but it continually keeps itself silent, continually preserves and conserves itself in this withholding. Conscience calls, but in that offering it also withdraws. In calling, Being calls *Dasein* back to its thrownness and keeps itself in reticence. That calling sends *for Dasein* to its destiny.

Destiny is the movement of *Dasein’s* comportment towards that which calls and beckons. By destiny we do not mean a preordained trajectory

with its end fixed on a certain goal. Rather, destiny is sending, a movement towards, which does not arrive but sustains itself as this very movement. It is the enticement of a promise that withdraws its fulfillment in favor of destiny, in favor of the possibility of destining and comporting towards.

Dasein's Promise

I have considered at length possibilities that are somehow already indebted: guilt to conscience, gift to Being, *Dasein* to Being, and even Being to *Dasein*. By "possibilities," I mean not possibilities for making an argument, but possibilities that enable the curiosity of thinking and desiring what is to be thought. In Nietzsche's text, I was drawn to the question of guilt as an unredeemable indebtedness, and I wanted to give consideration to what constitutes indebtedness. What I have been attempting to show, with Heidegger's texts, is that guilt and conscience, as givenness and as the voice that enables *Dasein's* coming to its ownmost possibility, are enticed not by a sense of duty but compelled by *Dasein's* own promise. Promise for what? For Being. This is not to say that *Dasein* aspires to be something definite and knows what it desires in/from Being. Rather, *Dasein* is compelled, urged, and profoundly swayed by the gift of promise, the gift that is given at the withdrawal of promise as fulfillment. When Nietzsche spoke of bad conscience, he recognized humans' "soul" in the turning-inward of unsatisfied and deferred gratifications. When Heidegger says that *Dasein's* guilt is what enables it to turn to itself, thrown back into itself, more originarily, he means that *Dasein*, as the being-there, has always already prepared for—"wanted"—conscience. Even more significantly, *Dasein* finds itself only in this waiting, this state of anxiety and anticipation. The question is not whether *Dasein* can ever repay its debt, but that *Dasein's* possibility resides and dwells in the awareness—unauthentic or authentic—of this very indebtedness. I do not mean to conflate the moral subject in Nietzsche's text with *Dasein*, nor do I wish to justify or propose their similarities. My interest lies in the inflection of guilt as granted and in one's very being as a negotiated possibility. In other words, I am interested in the enabling structure of the promise and not who makes that promise or who responds to it and under what conditions. One is fundamentally indebted, but the possibility of restitution lies not in compensation, but desire. One is indebted to oneself without knowing or recognizing it.

Sustaining the Subject

To return to the issue of subjectification which informed my trajectory thus far, I have attempted to consider three questions. First, if conscience were what induces the subject to embrace a certain guilty subjectivity, as, for example, in an Althusserian interpellation, then is there in fact any subject who is not already guilty? In other words, how else can we think of subjectification, other than in terms of domination and abjection? My concern has not been how one comes to be a subject, but, rather, how does guilt complicate the subjectification it supposedly helps and facilitates. Having in mind the Freudian subject who repeats and reenacts occasions for guilt or self-punishment so as to reorganize and substitute pleasure for displeasure, I have attempted, however, to distance guilt/self-punishment from gratification/pleasure so as to give thought to what *sustains* the subject. In short, what enables the subject to survive has been leading my inquiry into this first question.

In considering guilt as not only the necessary but also the enabling condition of subjectivity, one needs to distinguish more precisely the contractual relation between subject and Being, between the one who readily anticipates to-be and that towards/in which this fulfillment is promised. How is this rapport not only non-relational—that is, suspended of absolute relationality—but also not to be transcended—that is, representing one's ownmost and contractual possibility? What does the subject turn to when s/he offers him/herself up to Being, transposed into a particular image, determination, or designation? Even taking into account Heidegger's reminder that this is only a transposition and thus the appropriation of Being by and in everydayness, I am provoked by the ambiguous reticence of Being that still gives and lends itself to *Dasein*, even in the latter's unauthentic existence.

Thirdly, how does this contractual relation, an always-already indebtedness, account for the fact that an interpellation is always without specificity, and even though the subject takes it as particularized to her/his being, the subject's recognition of that address is always a misrecognition? To articulate this question more carefully, we need to review briefly the resonances of misrecognition in at least two texts. Back at the scene of interpellation, Althusser specifies that the subject's recognition of him/herself in the address is always a misrecognition because it is the subject who takes him/herself as the addressee in response to the address. There is, therefore, no recognition other than misrecognition; every recognition is a misrecognition. This resonance harks back to the Lacanian corpus, in

which misrecognition constitutes the only possibility in which the subject can be, that is, infinitely misrecognized and enabled to continually desire. My third question, then, is to understand the constitutiveness of the failure of misrecognition, of ever and repeatedly approaching plenitude without possessing it as fully realized. Put differently, my question has to do with the predicament of *Dasein*—which can no longer be thought as a predicament—to ever anticipate and be on the look-out for what gives it meaning, and indeed, from where that meaning is given.

Heidegger has said that the voice of conscience is not to be thought in an utterance. The call that calls *Dasein* back into itself is not to be taken as communication. The gift sent in such a calling is not a reassurance of one's attentiveness and proximity to Being, but an uncanniness that lets the sending reach for *Dasein* most openly. The giving itself, its very possibility and promise, is withheld in such a sending. But this concealment is not a coveting. Concealment is that reticence without which the gift of Being cannot be sent, without whose favor that sending cannot be under way. The promise itself remains to be read. In this last text under discussion, I wish to consider the constitutive failure or non-arrival of the subject's desire and fulfillment as that in which its promise is experienced with most certainty.

Austin: Pleasure in Failure

If Nietzsche has given the question of guilt to be thought as indebtedness, and if, for Heidegger, this indebtedness is further considered as a gift of Being, then Austin responds to both thinkers as the subject at once guided by the promise of plenitude and the consciousness of its impossibility. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* performs a series of expulsions to free itself of infelicitous speech acts, which are susceptible to failure due to extenuating circumstances. Austin's project is well known; he sets out to distinguish performative from constative speech acts, only to confess that he is "floundering" amidst this series of collapses. He then moves on to determining utterances in terms of forces—locutionary, perlocutionary, and illocutionary—only to, again, admit to the futility of this task: "these formulas are at best very slippery tests" (131).

Despite these at best self-contradicting formulas, Austin continues to search for the decisive criteria upon which performative utterances can be determined in terms of force differentiation. What enables and generates his repeated efforts, it appears, lies in the very impossibility of carrying out

this project, a failure he recognizes: "the thing seems hopeless *from the start*" (67; my emphasis). One wonders if such a "hopeless" project could have had a "start" if it has been able to do nothing but engender its own continual failures. In fact, in spite of the title, Austin has told us anything but *how to do things with words*.

However, what cannot escape, and would even undermine, one's critique of Austin is the secret pleasure he so publicly enjoys in throwing his hands up in the air. In the proliferation of his failures to come up with a definitive set criteria for performative speech acts and to successfully distinguish the latter from constative speech acts, Austin, rather than becoming frustrated, is increasingly good-humored by the lack of prospects. With constantly thwarted new beginnings, he nonetheless begins again, with that very repetition as the only guarantee of the text. Bringing us "farther back" to "fundamentals," Austin seems unable to abandon the promise of the very possibility of a beginning. His own performative is always "unhappy," or "infelicitous," while doing anything but leaving him speechless. In fact, he always rushes to the fore, confessing rather loudly his failures. In a parenthetical note, he remarks, "I must explain again that we are floundering here. To feel the firm ground of prejudice slipping away is exhilarating, but brings its revenges" (61).

This curious passage, executed in humor, reveals a certain compulsion. Austin "must" relieve himself of this knowledge, and we may do well to ask whether the exhilaration he feels is inseparable from the price or guilt it incurs. While commenting on the futility or infelicity of the project, he nonetheless regenerates grounds for further explications. It is as though the text, while attempting to utter a performative speech act—the *how* of how to do things with words, obsesses on its own stammering. The problematic the text posits is no longer whether a speech act performs and how complete is its accomplishment, but, rather, the movement of failure itself and the pleasure it generates in sending itself back to itself, to its "fundamentals," to its "start." In other words, every time the project is declared to be futile, "hopeless from the start," or having "at best very slippery tests," Austin is able to regenerate new grounds for further research and speculation. The topic of discussion proliferates around his failure, and becomes a tireless inquiry into failure itself. It becomes more and more apparent that what Austin continues to sustain in the text is not the felicity of an utterance, but, rather, the infelicity of the utterance of the text—how to do things with words. The question is perhaps not the "words" but the "doing" itself, the ceaseless labor which gives itself up to perpetual futility but which, for that very reason, constitutes itself over and

over again. Paradoxically, the continual failure of the project does not incapacitate, but allows Austin to experience distinct pleasure/humor in that very impossible attainment. Austin's self-reflexive and -mocking commentaries can be taken as only a self-reconstitution enabled by its very deconstitution.³

The distinct pleasure—the jokes—that Austin so tirelessly creates and enjoys in failure removes the ostensible goal from the labor itself. What a performative utterance guarantees and reserves for itself is its own iterability. The labor performed is not toward a goal, a completion, but toward a constant return to the labor itself. The pleasure of failure is the pleasure of repeating, stammering, rearticulating, and re-promising that failure more precisely. It is structured to the possibility of promise; and the promise is inevitably constituted in the failure as a yet-to-be.

Austin's text performs most faithfully the labor of desire. Confessing to its failures and tirelessly pointing them out, Austin plays out the desire of the subject as that which always exceeds what it ostensibly embraces and desires. Despite his loyalty to the project of providing a systematic explanation and differentiation for speech acts, his actual trajectory reveals the contrary. However, my interest has not been to point out the inconsistencies in his text. Rather, I have attempted to show the economy of his text as an impossibility, as in fact a desire not to arrive at its completion, its felicity and happiness. It is not that this desire negates plenitude, but that it exceeds any particular promise of plenitude. What it wishes to accomplish has been contrary to what it actually sustains, namely, failure and incompleteness. Yet in face of that inevitable failure, Austin finds the possibility of reconstituting his text. It is the possibility of a promise that is kept in this constant failing. It is the non-arrival and the yet-to-arrive that sustains the promise of the text.

One could say that Austin is guilty of not living up to the promise given by the title of his book. In fact, Austin would be the first to point that out, as he so often does. In his acknowledgment of that failure, of that outstanding debt to the audience who patiently sits through his twelve lectures, Austin never fails, however, to persist as a philosopher. He never ceases to function as a desiring and enabled subject. He does not mind, perhaps, theorizing in the Nietzschean space of "a way, an interlude, a bridge" as a great promise.

Conclusion

Subjectivity is an impossible order, which—however—is not to say that subjectification is undermined or discouraged by this impossibility. Althusser says that we are always already subjects, but that does not preclude the possibility that we are never the subjects we think we are. As one turns and embraces one's subjection in the hailing, one "gives" the possibility of its own fulfillment to an Other. But this giving exceeds the capacity of the Other to give as soon as it is particularized to a certain address. To be kept captive and attached to a certain identity is subject to a series of mediations, not the least of which is the subject's desire, proliferating itself around and necessarily exceeding particular objects or designations of desire. The guilty Nietzschean subject need not be incapacitated by bad conscience; in fact, a guilty subject like Austin regenerates his own affirmation in the pleasure of failure. When the *It Gives* determines *Dasein* in a sending/giving, *Dasein* also gives in turn, but in giving, *Dasein* gives "more" because *Dasein* does not know that s/he gives. In thinking that s/he still needs to have this desire granted, *Dasein* exceeds the capacity of the one who gives, because *Dasein* does not know that s/he "wants" from him/herself. The desire of the subject is always located elsewhere, exceeding any particular object or designation, because it is a promise itself, not to be transcended.⁴

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NOTES

1. It is this proximity or temporal distance that subjects *Dasein* to Being even more profoundly. See Derrida's appropriation of this deferral in the staging of the subject's desire in "Before the Law."

2. For Nancy, this experience allows the subject to understand, in a way that threatens her/his very deconstitution—"shattering"—the recuperation of her/his being as the gift/property of finitude, as a "traversal" and interruption of the continuity of subject. See "Shattered Love."

3. Interestingly, the promise is one of Austin's exemplary illocutionary speech acts. As with other performative utterances, the promise is susceptible to certain "ills" or infelicities, such as misinvocations, misfires, and abuses:

It is obviously necessary that to have promised I must normally (A) have been heard by someone, perhaps the promisee; (B) have been understood by him as promising. . . . If one of another of these conditions is not satisfied, doubts arise as to whether I have really promised, and it might be held that my act was only attempted or was void. (22)

Even if Austin's attempts were voided, he still manages to "do" something in the meantime. He manages to survive as a promising subject, as a subject who is ceaselessly making promises. What Austin in fact does is subverting the promise and perverting its illocutionary force. With ceaseless repetitions and restarts, his continual attempts and invalidations violate, in a most innocent manner, the unique property of illocutionary speech acts—performativity in and of itself. See Felman on seduction and Derrida on the constitutive failure of performativity in "Signature Event Context."

4. I thank Professors Judith Butler and Frederick Dolan for their helpful comments.